FREE SECRET OF MANA & LOST SPHEAR GIFTS!

AMAZING MODEL AND GIANT POSTER INSIDE



PS4 | XBOX ONE | NINTENDO SWITCH | PC | 3DS | PS VITA | Android | iOS

GAMES MASTER



DEATH STRANDING

Are you ready for the weirdest reveal yet?

MARIO'S GREATEST HITS

FROM **DONKEY KONG** TO **ODYSSEY** – WE RANK HIS BEST GAMES EVER!

154 GAMES INSIDE!

WORLD WAR Z
SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS
DRIFTLAND
MEGA MAN 11
AND MORE!

HUGE REVIEW!

PLAYERUNKNOWN'S BATTLEGROUNDS

The definitive verdict

HANDS-ON!

FAR CRY 5

Fighting grizzly bears... with a grenade launcher

LATEST INFO!

DREAMS

Make your own game!



THE UK'S NO.1 MULTIFORMAT GAMES MAG
GAMES MASTER
Issue 326 / February 2018

"Who could be more deserving of a true GM celebration?"

From his birth as tenacious carpenter Jumpman, all the way to his latest turn as a globetrotting adventurer, the story of Mario is one of the most iconic in all of videogames. The moustached mascot has seen and done it all over the last 37 years – and he's starred in more than his fair share of the best games ever made along the way.

Who could be more deserving, then, of a true GamesMaster celebration? This one glorious issue, we pay tribute to the legacy of a true gaming icon – and decide, once and for all, which are his *greatest* hits.

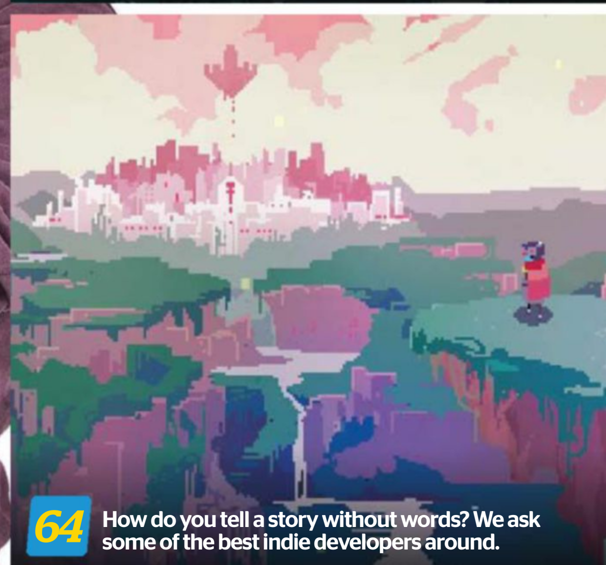
That's not all you'll find inside these packed pages, either. 2018 is well under way now, and you won't catch us resting on our laurels. This month we've been battling wildlife in Far Cry 5, exploring the subconscious in Dreams, and fighting for our lives in PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds. We've got the latest news on Soulcalibur VI, artistic musings on the beautifully-crafted worlds of Team Ico, and as much sense as we can make out of Death Stranding. And that's just for starters...

Enjoy your GM!

Robin Valentine – Editor

EDITOR'S CHOICE
MY TOP PICKS THIS ISSUE







GET MORE FROM YOUR GM!



Online at www.gamesradar.com/gamesmaster



...or subscribe. See p92 for details.

Contents

What's In Your Latest Issue?



Team GM

Meet The Magazine's Makers!



THE MOST DEDICATED TEAM IN THE BUSINESS

With new staff writer Sam Greer, the GamesMaster team is finally back to full strength and ready to take on anything 2018 can throw at us! Well, any videogame at least.



Robin Valentine

A new team member proved the perfect excuse for a fresh photoshoot – Robin especially was relieved to replace all of his questionable headshots with much more handsome versions like this one. Oof, what a hunk.

What's your favourite Mario game ever?
Super Mario Odyssey



Sam Greer

All the way from the frozen wilds of Scotland comes a true force to be reckoned with. She's a lean, mean, videogame-criticising machine. Her first assignment? A game about dating cats. Well, we've got to drag her down to our level.

What's your favourite Mario game ever?
Wrecking Crew



Ben Tyrer

Appearing in such a Nintendo-stuffed issue is videogame treason of the highest order for a man who writes for Official PlayStation Magazine by day. If caught, he'll receive the highest punishment – buried in a landfill of old copies of ET for the Atari 2600.

What's your favourite Mario game ever?
Super Mario Odyssey [*Copycat* – Ed]



Rob Crossland

We may have finally broken our long-suffering art editor this month. Laying out a timeline of every single Mario game is… let's say, a little tricky. So as you read, know that his blood, sweat, and tears have gone into those pages. Which may make the colours run a bit.

What's your favourite Mario game ever?
Mario Kart

Issue 326/February 2018



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FANBASE

The best of your emails, tweets, and carrier pigeon death threats



Being able to take snaps in Super Mario Odyssey perfectly fit its tourism theme.

LETTER OF THE MONTH

Sean Hollyman writes in to celebrate photographic fun

After playing games such as Horizon: Zero Dawn and Middle Earth: Shadow Of Mordor, I've really come to appreciate the photo modes that games have been implementing. I feel like it adds a whole new layer to the game, letting me act as an action photographer!

With all the tools available to use, you're able to pause the action and really appreciate the beauty and hard work of what the developers have created in this world. I can't count the number of times I've just had to stop dead in my tracks, pull up the photo mode, and just try to capture the moment at the best possible angle, lighting, and filter.



Here's one of Sean's brilliant photo mode screenshots from Horizon Zero Dawn!

I really, really love this feature as it has so much flexibility and can add many, many more hours of gameplay dedicated to just trying to capture that picture of the sunset just right. I really hope more developers consider adding a photo mode to their games so I can take badass screenshots and bask in how amazing the game looks!

Sean Hollyman, email

It's been lovely to see photo modes become more common in recent years – as you say, taking the perfect shot is like a game in itself! And with game worlds more expansive, imaginative, and beautifully-rendered than ever before, it's great to have the tools to really appreciate that hard work, and share your favourite bits with others.

We always love seeing our readers' creative snaps – so much that, this issue, we've decided to give over two extra pages of Fanbase to all your best screenshots. Check them out overleaf! ■

WIN!

Got an opinion? Have even the barest grasp of words and how to put them together? The best letter bags a free mystery prize!*

*Don't forget to include your postal address and chosen gaming format!



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Code talker

Some people like to think that cheats have 'vanished' from games. I don't think that's true, but then again what was the last game I played with cheats?

It was most likely... GTA V! That game came out back in 2013 originally but then came out once more on the current-gen consoles a year later.

Do you guys, or any of the readers, think that perhaps with last gen that cheat codes became taboo? I ask this as back with last gen if you used cheats, the trophies/achievements would get disabled. It felt as if using cheats was punished in a way, or that the developers were just telling us "you can't be god and still have achievements!".

Cheats have existed for years and even though people may say they have faded least they'll always exist as mods. And I suppose the Konami code will still work on Konami games forever!

What do you think? I am curious to find out if you guys love and miss all the cheat codes of the past and if you think cheats have well and truly vanished? Also what was the last game you guys played with cheats?

Scott Jones, email

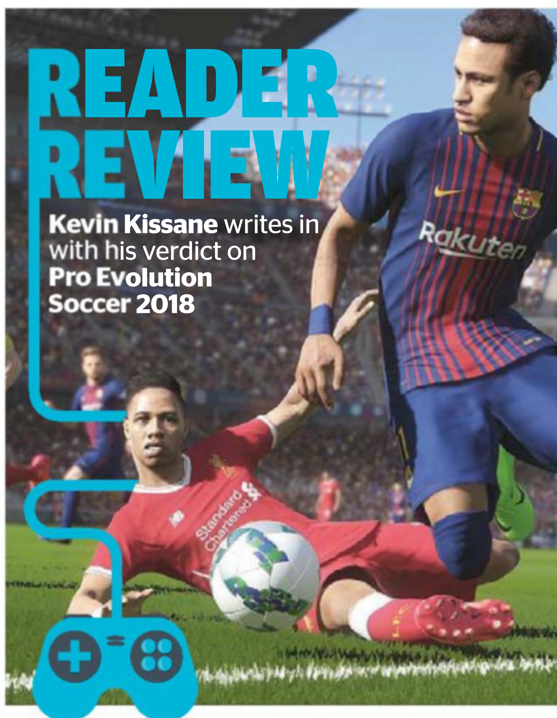
They certainly seem to have gone the way of the dodo for the most part, a few questionable forays into cheat-codes-as-DLC aside. We can't remember the last time we used one. Though on PC, as you say, you can still do whatever you like via mods, cheat engines, and more.

We do miss the freedom they provided sometimes – editor Robin has fond memories of giving himself infinite money in The Sims to build the mansion of his dreams.

Large and in charge

While I love that GM is bigger and better with every issue, I feel that the same trend in games is a different matter.

Now don't get me wrong, I love getting loads of game for my money, but I feel that the 'bigger is better' mantra is no longer the way to go. Witcher 3 is a great example – a rich, colourful, varied, and stunning world to explore. And vast – too vast. I set off for the horizon with nothing other than a map marker to guide me and what I encounter on the way almost ruins the game for me – 15 random bandit encounters, 217 quests taken from notice boards, 174 mythical beasties to kill, several NPCs leading me into ambushes and a scared horse. 19 hours later and I've forgotten where I'm going and what for...



READER REVIEW

Kevin Kissane writes in with his verdict on **Pro Evolution Soccer 2018**

Even as a PES fan already, this, the 17th instalment in Konami's football series, took me by surprise.

Master League, the greatest league mode of any videogame football simulation, is back in my life. It's had a few media-focused tweaks that are pretty pointless, but mirror modern football well. It can be life-consuming, but it's exhilarating.

But what about the football itself? Master the basics, and even the most novice players will be stringing one-touch passing moves together. The key is build up play, and it's as precise as you want it to be. Passing/crosses/build-up is everything. Like the real thing.

Expect a challenge the other way, also. Defending isn't easy with the game's biggest gameplay issue: slide-tackling. Regardless of position, any tap of the slide button means a full-on tackle. And most likely a foul. That aside, you can press as freely and as high up the pitch as you want, and instruct team mates to do the same. Or not, if that's your tactical choice.

PES 2018 is an excellent football title. A data edit patch really is a must for any true football fan to want it, but it's worth a few minutes of hassle. As Konami would say, the pitch is ours. With PES 2018, make it yours.

92%



"30 GREAT QUESTS ARE BETTER THAN 200 GOOD ONES"

30 great quests are better than 200 good ones. Red Dead Redemption remains a classic but the map should have been halved to keep the amount of empty desert trekking to a minimum. Fallout 4 was overkill, especially with the DLC on top. Assassin's Creed gets more icons on the map but less story…

These are but my own thoughts on the matter, and it is nice to be a gamer in a time where we can critique a game because it's too big, too much value for money and ultimately too good!

Thoughts GM?

Oh and keep up the great work!

Adam Wiper, email

Flattery will get you everywhere Adam! Glad you enjoy the magazine.

While it pains us to hear a bad word against The Witcher 3, we do agree in general that the trend has become too ubiquitous. Expansive worlds are great, but they don't suit every game, and as you say it's often a case of quantity over quality. And if you think these open worlds are time-consuming as a player, try being the people who have to get through all of them for review! Pity us…

Just one more…

If you could get a new sequel to any game ever, which would you choose?

Bloody Roar, for sure. If Soulcalibur and Arika's Fighting EX Layer can rise from the ashes in 2018, so can Hudson Soft's/Eighting's anthropomorphic fighter.

Ryan Esler, @RG_Esler

Would it be taking the biscuit if I said Shenmue? I'm still not overly convinced I'll see it in my lifetime!

Kevin Taylor, Facebook

I want a sequel to Rise Of The Tomb Raider. Cliffhanger ending wound me up!

Robert O'Donnell, Facebook

Hear me out… Sunset Overdrive.

[rezo] rachel , @rahcek

Three words: Comix Zone please!

Black Swan Game Theory, @BSGTheory

Broken Sword. You can never get bored of George Stobbart's adventures.

dave, @DaveHolmes82

Pepsi Man. Pepsi Man every day.

YM, @YM971

I don't want to be judged for this but would like another Viva Piñata.

derek schwartz, @derek_mafs

Here on Team GM we're still pining for a full sequel to Alan Wake… Well, a mag team can dream, right? ■



OFF THE CHART!

The hot topics you've been gabbing about



- **35%** The best stories in games
- **25%** Your favourite Switch games so far
- **17%** Gaming's badass giant robots
- **13%** Preparing for the zombie apocalypse
- **10%** The perfect gaming sidekick

YOUR TOP 5 MOST WANTED

The most exciting upcoming games, as voted for by you on our Facebook and Twitter pages



1 RED DEAD REDEMPTION 2

Format PS4, XO **ETA** Spring

Not long to wait now. Hopefully. We're starting to forget there was ever a time before this game started taking the top spot every single month…



2 THE LAST OF US PART II

Format PS4 **ETA** Winter 2019

We've got rather longer to wait for Naughty Dog's latest, we fear, though that doesn't seem to be cooling your excitement for it.



3 NI NO KUNI II: REVENANT KINGDOM

Format PS4, PC **ETA** 23 March

A surprise surge in popularity on our social pages sees this charming JRPG rocket into the charts this month!



4 KINGDOM HEARTS 3

Format PS4, XO **ETA** Winter

We didn't think this series could surprise us any more, but a Toy Story level where the party turns into action figures is just *too bonkers*.



5 SPIDER-MAN

Format PS4 **ETA** Summer

Spidey's fighting Mr Negative, eh? What a coincidence – that's our nickname for editor Robin during deadline week. [*You're fired* – Ed]

SCREENSHOT SHOWCASE

This month, we're putting the spotlight on your amazing snaps! Thanks to everyone who submitted – and if you've got some pics of your own, please email them in to gamesmaster@futurenet.com, or send them to us on Facebook or Twitter.



Watch Dogs 2 – The Macabre Gamer, @TheMacabreGamer



Assassin's Creed: Origins
Leon Cleary, email



Uncharted 4: A Thief's End
Natalie Austin, Facebook



Call Of Duty: WWII
Barrie Rimmer, Facebook



Horizon Zero Dawn
Natalie Austin, Facebook

STAR SHOT! Congrats – your mystery prize is on its way!



Elite: Dangerous
Paul Evans, Facebook



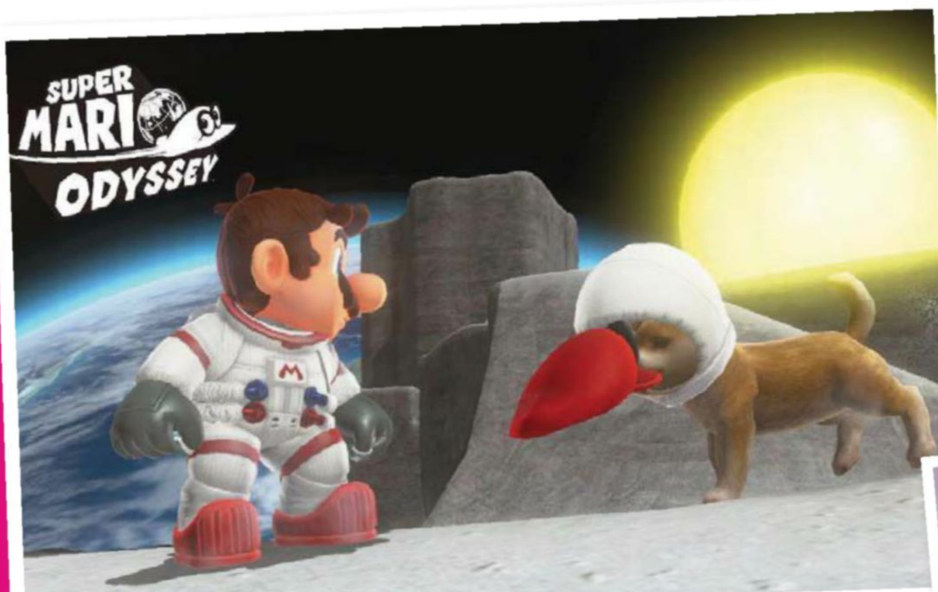
Forza 5 Motorsport
Barrie Rimmer, Facebook



Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice
Danny MacQuade, Facebook



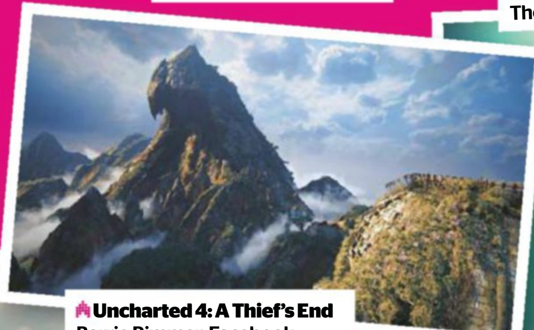
Assassin's Creed: Origins
MantaGTJ001, @mantagtj



Super Mario Odyssey
Ryan Greaves, Facebook

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim
Adamski, @amazingdweezo

Assassin's Creed: Origins
Thomas Conneely, @T_Dog109


Uncharted 4: A Thief's End
Barrie Rimmer, Facebook


No Man's Sky
The Macabre Gamer, @TheMacabreGamer


Pyre
Ken Allsop, @KenY2Ken


Need For Speed: Payback
MantaGTJ001, @mantagtj


The Last Of Us
Steven Leckey, Facebook


LA Noire
Christopher Galazka, Facebook


Life Is Strange
Christopher Preece, @chrisjpreece


Mario Kart 8 Deluxe
Adamski, @amazingdweezo



Now that is a seriously cute Yoshi – great work, @GrayVixen!



Stephen Bell's Oddworld fanart's got us all nostalgic... Abe would approve.

YOU LOVE GAMES

Cool stuff and videogame culture



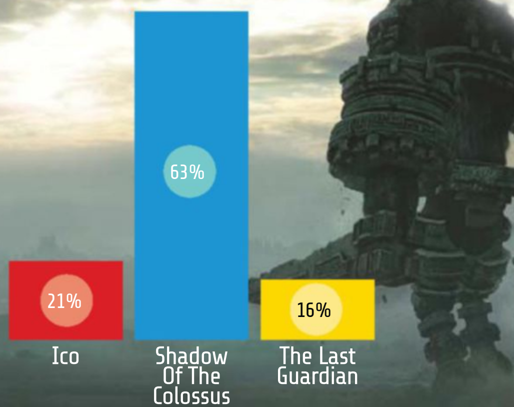
@SpaghettiPirate's excellent Zelda fanart is a tribute to a panel from one of the Darth Vader comics.



Little Miss Metamorph's sent us this brilliant shot of her cosplaying as Yennefer from The Witcher 3! Photo by Michael Ferrol Antoine.

POLL POSITION

Keeping democracy alive on our Twitter feed



Which is the best Team Ico game?

Game	Votes
Ico	21%
Shadow Of The Colossus	63%
The Last Guardian	16%



PUBG players – have you had a chicken dinner yet?*

Answer	Votes
Yes	40%
No	60%

*No idea what we're going on about? Head to p68 for our PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds review...

SOCIAL GROUSING

Wisdom and weirdness from our bustling social media channels



Mario's the most powerful game character. His hat to possess anyone and anything is a game changer. Superman better be worried. No amount of CG will erase *that* moustache!

Leigh Way, @LA_Way



Weirdest character in videogames? That Seaman thing from the Dreamcast game...

james dean smith, @jamesdeansmith

MANIAC OF THE MONTH!



Seeing Mario 64 for the first time ever was the most mind blowing experience for any game of all time!

Chris Lau, @ChrisLau90



When my February 2018 issue of GamesMaster arrives it will be 14 straight years of collecting it without missing an issue. #proud

Niall Taylor-Ellis, @NTaylorEllis



Red Dead Redemption's story absolutely pulls me in, every time I play it. And man, the ending! I cry every time. So awesome.

Jason Crain, Facebook



Horizon Zero Dawn has a brilliantly original story, brilliant characters and actors, and fantastic world building. It'd make a cracking TV series, and seriously needs the HBO treatment.

Natalie Austin, Facebook



DOES YOUR SOUL STILL BURN?

Soulcalibur VI battles its way onto the gaming stage



The Burning Question

Which is the best Soulcalibur game ever?



Soulcalibur II
it was perfect at the time with the best selection of characters!
Barrie Rimmer, Facebook

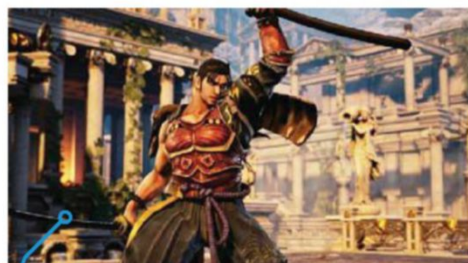


Soulcalibur
All but arcade perfect on Dreamcast – it was life of the console when I first got one.
Andy CT, @superandyt83

Visit www.facebook.com/officialgamesmaster and www.twitter.com/gamesmaster to take part in next issue's burning questions.

BRAWLING BUDDIES

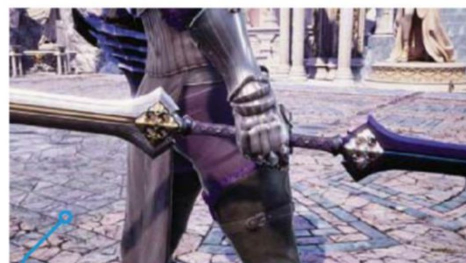
Get up to speed on the game's characters so far



One of the most iconic Soulcalibur fighters, showy samurai Mitsurugi has appeared in every entry to date.



Another fan favourite, Sophitia wields a sword and shield and, like Mitsurugi, appears in her original attire.



The end of the trailer teased a brief glimpse of a new brawler wielding a nifty double-ended sword.

Soulcalibur VI is a real treat for the peepers. Unreal Engine VI powers the beautifully rendered environments and character models.



Swords, staffs, and oversized axes at the ready: after a five-year hiatus, Soulcalibur is swinging back onto gaming platforms with its sixth instalment. Marking the 20th anniversary of the weapon-based brawler, this latest entry promises to commemorate the occasion by offering us the chance to revisit the events of the very first game and 'uncover hidden truths'. While the roster is yet to be announced, we're promised it'll contain fan favourites as well as fresh faces – see 'Brawling Buddies' for the ones we know about so far.

Footage revealed so far features Sophitia and a youthful-looking Mitsurugi engaged in some seriously stylish scrapping. Motohiro Okubo, who previously worked on Tekken 7, is handling producer duties on Soulcalibur VI. Speaking on stage Okubo said: "Working together with Harada-san I felt a great responsibility to continue Tekken's legacy of delivering the most dynamic and hard-hitting action within the fighting game category." He added: "Utilising the lessons that I learned on Tekken 7 I am ready to fully take charge of a new project." You can judge whether those lessons were learned pretty soon, as the game's currently scheduled for release later this year.

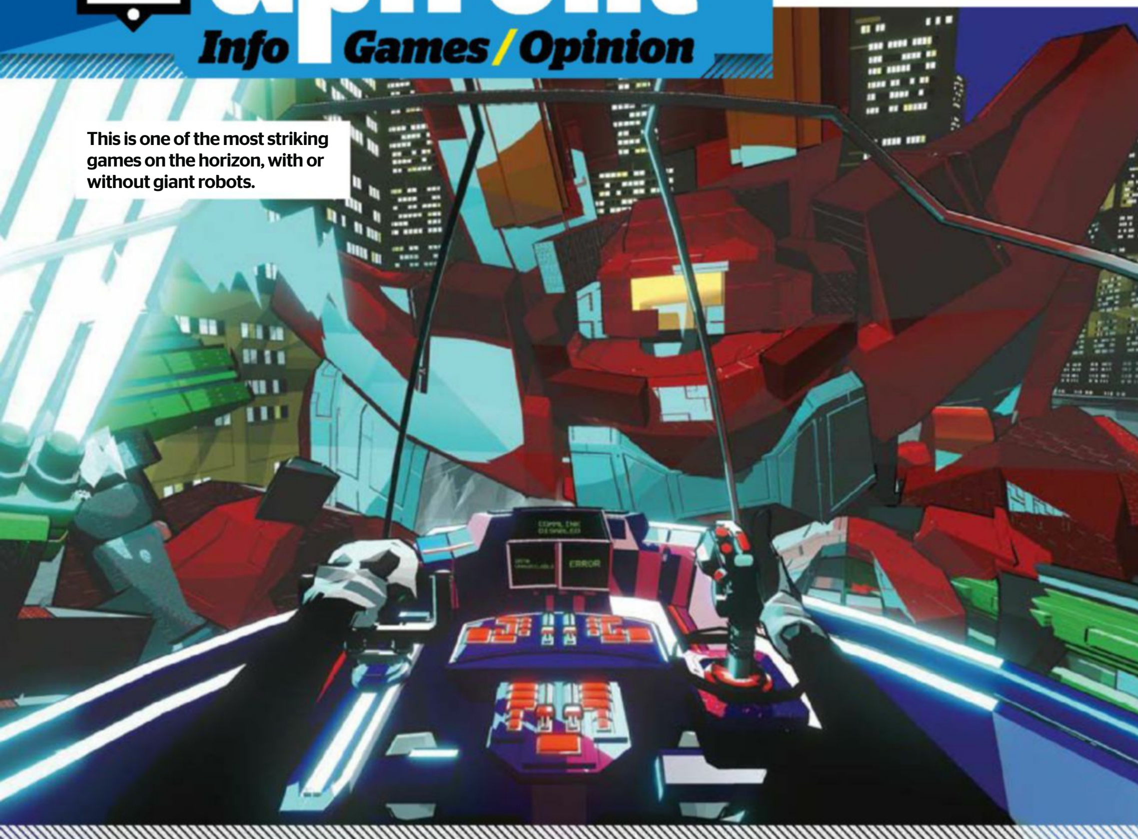
Featuring the fast action and fluid combat the series is known for, the team is expanding the fighter with a new mechanic dubbed Reversal Edge. The system allows you to parry an opponent's attacks – similar to the damage-nullifying Guard Impact – and follow up with a powerful counter-attack. Footage shows Sophitia blocking multiple incoming slashes before unleashing a boosted strike, complete with dazzling red lightning effects. While there has been an emphasis on making Reversal Edge easy to execute, it should add an extra element of strategy, and reward those with a more considered approach rather than those who mindlessly bash buttons. It's unclear exactly how this new mechanic works; it may be tied to a meter that allows players to enter a defensive state for a limited time, or perhaps it's reliant on more manual blocking manoeuvres before culminating in a powerful offensive blow.

Similar to Tekken 7, the game features a slow-motion element that allows for deeper appreciation of the action. Each character has their own unique weapons and fighting styles – we're expecting most of the cast featured in previous entries to make an appearance. Also, given the series' affinity for adding characters outside of its own universe (previous titles included celebrity combatants such as Ezio and Darth Vader) we anticipate some exciting announcements on the guest appearance front.

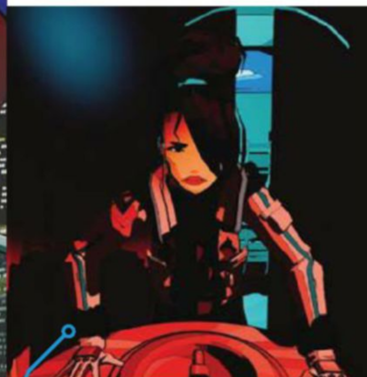
"A NEW MECHANIC ALLOWS YOU TO PARRY ATTACKS AND FOLLOW UP WITH A POWERFUL COUNTER ATTACK"

A merging of the old and new, Project Soul's dedication and commitment to honouring the legacy of Soulcalibur, while at the same time expanding it, is admirable. While the last effort failed to resonate with fans, the stage is set for this soft reboot to ignite players' passion for the series once more. ■ ***Anne-Marie Coyle***





This is one of the most striking games on the horizon, with or without giant robots.



Protagonist Vana seems like one real badass, and maybe just a tad grumpy. A good combination in a fighter?



Pretty much everything that happens in this game is going to demand your attention. Just look at it.

PUSHING OUR BUTTONS

Blazing Legion: Ignition sets the mech genre alight

If the shots above haven't clearly illuminated the kind of game this newly announced title is, then perhaps creator Ethan Redd's own introduction will help: "Blazing Legion: Ignition is an introspective first-person bullet hell about seven-storey tall mecha and consequences. If the action genre is rock 'n' roll, this game is black metal."

Sounds pretty cool, right? In motion it's a flurry of lights that's hard to take your eyes away from. The first-person mech swerves and slides through the sky, dishing out a hail of bullets. It looks like you'll constantly be busy, not given one moment to breathe. Redd explains the hectic pace: "From narrative to visual design Blazing Legion is about the feeling of facing insurmountable odds and still coming out swinging, and I'm definitely trying to channel some of that energy."

Techs mechs

The visual style really stands out – the intensity of colour is like nothing else in games at the moment, even if it does harken back to older games. And that's no bad thing; it's all down to Redd's inspirations. "Mid '90s Sega's output is definitely my biggest influence overall, in both design and visual aesthetics," he explains. "I love mechanical games where the story is in the verbs and atmosphere; there's a lot of wonderful storytelling possibilities in 'game-y' games that's often overlooked."

Despite the emphasis on action, lots of action, there's a story worth seeing here too. You will be filling the boots of Vana, a rebel fighting to spark an all-out revolt. "An ex-member of the titular Blazing Legion elite fighting force, Vana's ungodly skill and training place her at the forefront of the Insurrection, despite her turncoat status and the distrust of her comrades," Redd tells us.

When's it out, you ask? The plan is Autumn this year, though which platforms it's hitting is still TBC. ■

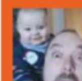
> "IF THE ACTION GENRE IS ROCK 'N' ROLL, THIS GAME IS BLACK METAL"

The Burning Question

Who or what is the best giant mech in videogames?



Liberty Prime
Probability of not winning this vote - *zero percent!!!*
@amazingdweezo

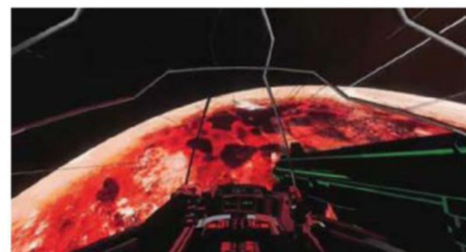


Vah Rudania
From BOTW. It looked awesome climbing around Death Mountain.
Tommy Markham, Facebook

Visit www.facebook.com/officialgamesmaster and www.twitter.com/gamesmaster to take part in next issue's burning questions.







The enemy designs are spectacularly fearsome, looking like they've just crawled from the pages of a Clive Barker book.

FRIGHTS AND FIREPOWER

Ethan Carter dev reveals gothic fantasy FPS **Witchfire**

Following its brilliantly mysterious, contemplative adventure The Vanishing Of Ethan Carter, you'd be forgiven for having forgotten that developer The Astronauts has plenty of expertise when it comes to fast-paced, over-the-top first-person action too. But it certainly remembers.

The teaser trailer for its new project, Witchfire, starts out with a rather leisurely stroll through a decrepit graveyard. It cleverly deceives the audience into thinking this is another walking simulator – and then the protagonist unexpectedly unveils some hefty weaponry, the game swiftly transforming into a full-blown FPS that looks more like Doom with a dark fantasy setting than anything else.

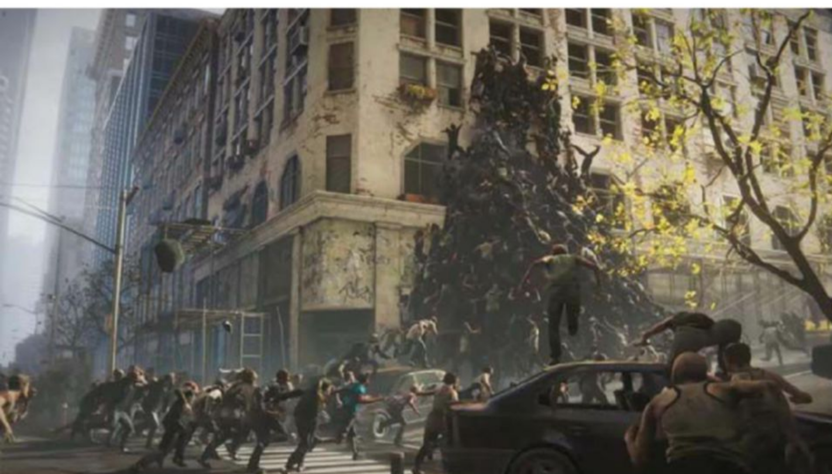
Despite the increased emphasis on action, The Astronauts still isn't skimping on the aesthetics. Using a process known as photogrammetry, the team has been able to produce 3D scans of real-life objects to incorporate into the game for ultimate realism. Even entire buildings were scanned – now that's some technical wizardry! it's the same technique that was used in The Vanishing Of Ethan Carter, and that game's stunning visuals certainly proved the concept. Thanks to the aid of Unreal Engine 4, the results are eye-wateringly smooth, realistic, and highly detailed visuals that blow most other shooters you could name right out of the water.

Hold your 'fire

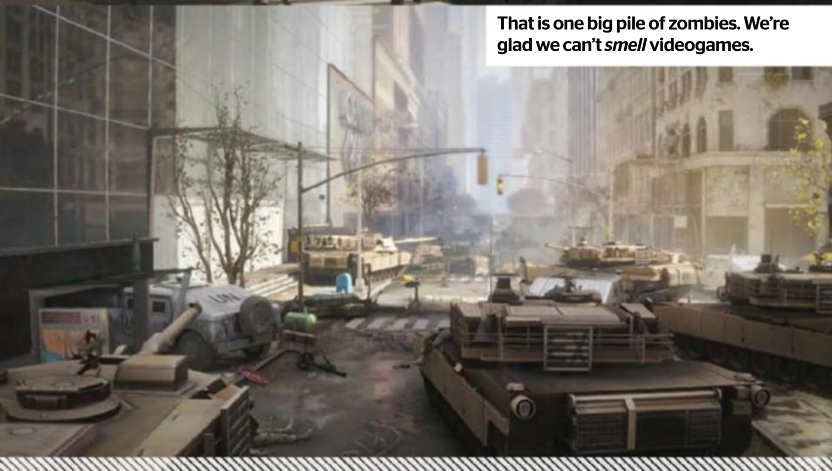
If you're eager for some fright-filled FPS action, we're afraid you're in for a substantial wait as the game's release is still a long way off, according to the developer. And with Witchfire only currently confirmed for PC, console players should contain their excitement for the moment. Though that's easier said than done given the game's impressively eerie environments, fearsome foes, and the well-established talent behind them. ■

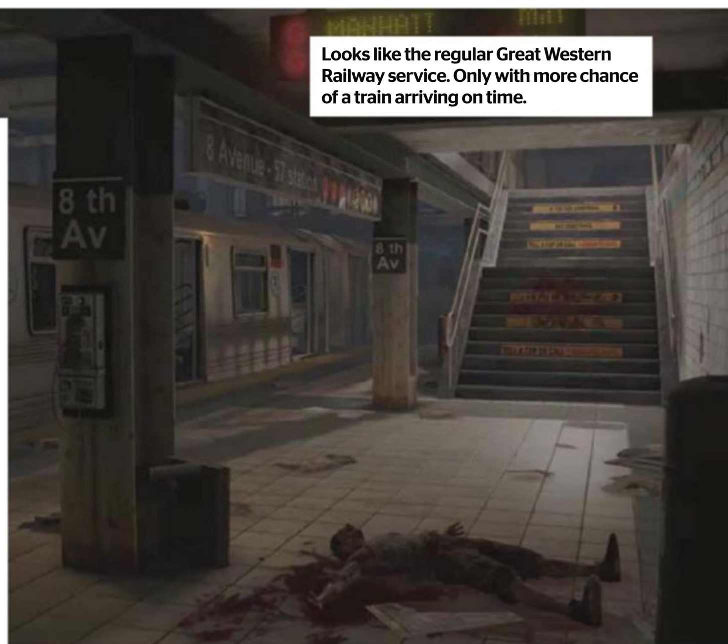
"SMOOTH, REALISTIC, AND HIGHLY DETAILED VISUALS BLOW MOST SHOOTERS OUT OF THE WATER"

The heads of Witchfire were also co-founders of People Can Fly, the developer behind the zany, style-centric shooter Bulletstorm.



That is one big pile of zombies. We're glad we can't *smell* videogames.





Looks like the regular Great Western Railway service. Only with more chance of a train arriving on time.



GLOBE ROTTING

Prove you're a better zombie hunter than Brad Pitt in **World War Z**

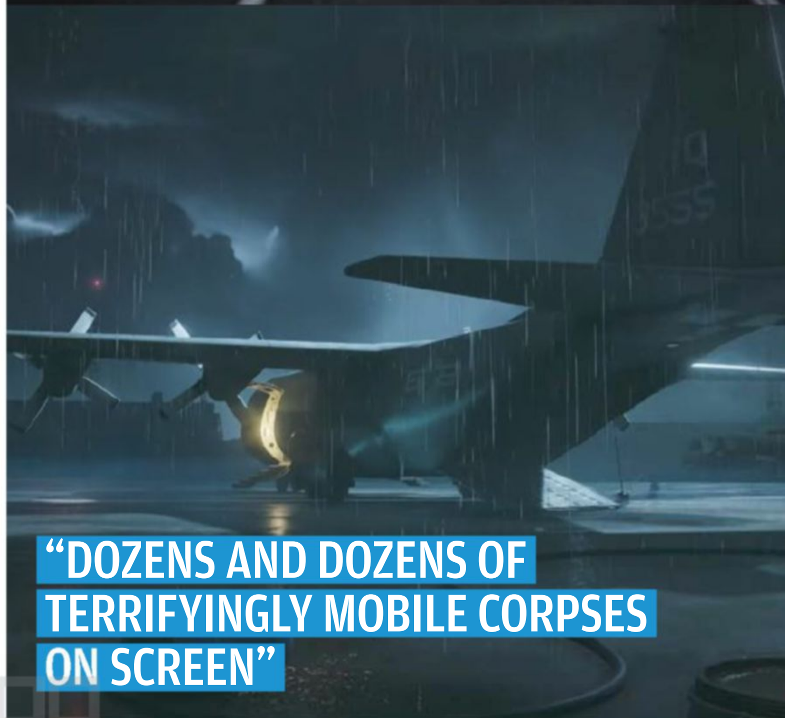
From the book of the same name and the film of the same name now comes the game of the same name, resurrected by Paramount and Saber Interactive for PC, PS4, and Xbox One.

The book, fully titled World War Z: An Oral History Of The Zombie War, purports to be the words of a UN agent narrating the accounts of survivors. The film adaptation is a much more action-driven affair, a globe-trotting adventure where the slow, lurching undead of the book are replaced with running, scrambling zombies that suit the film's big set pieces.

Z-cheers to that

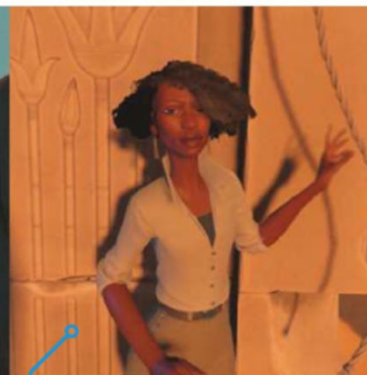
Thanks to the game retaining the book's international theme, the campaign promises stories from all around the world (locations cited include New York, Moscow, and Jerusalem) but it leans much more heavily on the film, borrowing the movies' 'zombies as rabid hordes' shtick, and putting dozens and dozens of terrifyingly mobile corpses on screen at any given moment. (Though don't expect Brad Pitt to make an appearance.) As in the film, the undead will scramble over each other and pile up to reach higher locations or get over obstacles. The game wants them to seem relentless, and make you feel that any respite is short lived.

The action's co-op, with you and your mates building traps and obstacles while using all the firepower at your disposal to keep the horde at bay. Given the range of locations, we're hoping regional materials will test our resourcefulness on launch later this year.

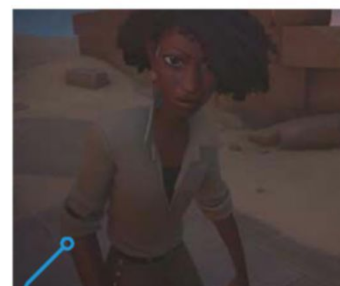


"DOZENS AND DOZENS OF TERRIFYINGLY MOBILE CORPSES ON SCREEN"

The use of lighting is really spectacular, and the art direction is every bit as compelling as that of Firewatch.



Your companion, Zora. The animation on display in the trailer is incredible – she's a totally believable person.



There's plenty of hurt feelings between Rashida and Zora. Expect more than a smidgin of trouble between the pair.

DIG IT

Unearthing Campo Santo's **In The Valley Of The Gods**

Campo Santo, the developer behind Firewatch, has announced its latest title. It's another first-person adventure – but this time the action takes us to Egypt. In The Valley Of The Gods casts you as Rashida, a disgraced former explorer and filmmaker, who has paired up with Zora, another explorer, to seek out a secluded valley and its various tombs. Rashida and Zora have a troubled history, and the trust (or lack of) between them will be tested as they navigate the ruins.

You will have to repair your relationship with Zora over the course of the game to avoid making your precarious journey even more difficult, and co-operation between the two will be a key feature. The game promises plenty of thrilling exploration and danger, as you find your way through the lavish Egyptian tombs.

In addition to the aforementioned treasure hunting, we're expecting traps and dangers to be avoided, though don't expect to encounter supernatural threats such as wandering mummies. You'll also get to indulge in some filmmaking, documenting and capturing the world around you as you venture deeper into the valley.

Fortune and glory

The game's visuals really have to be mentioned: the strong art direction of Firewatch has not been left behind, it's been brought to In The Valley Of The Gods with even greater graphical fidelity. The result is a game that really is quite jaw-dropping in motion. Characters move in an exceptionally lifelike manner – Zora looks amazing – and the environments, especially the lighting, are as striking as it gets.

Only recently Assassin's Creed: Origins depicted Ancient Egypt in a truly lavish matter, but In The Valley Of The Gods has a look that sets it completely apart – and probably a lot less stabbing. Come 2019, we'll want our mummy. ■

The Burning Question

If you could go explore anywhere in the world, where would you go?



Temple Of Doom
Tulum, Mexico, cave diving in the Temple Of Doom!
James Barber, @jaybarber



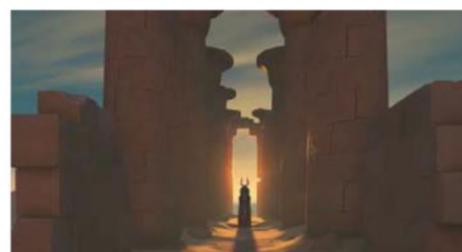
Japan
I've been obsessed with their culture ever since I was a kid.
Ross Murphy, @RossMurphy93

Visit www.facebook.com/officialgamesmaster and www.twitter.com/gamesmaster to take part in next issue's burning questions.

> "PROMISES PLENTY OF THRILLING EXPLORATION AS YOU FIND YOUR WAY THROUGH THE LAVISH TOMBS"







HURLEY ACCESS
ADVENTURES IN EARLY ACCESS
With your host... ★★LEON HURLEY★★

FOR GOD'S SAKE!

Laying down the word of the lord – well, the Leon – in Crest

Most god sims are really just glorified city builders where you micromanage settlement building and political discourse. What about a *real* god game where all you can do is issue commandments and watch your followers get on with it? That's the world of Crest, and one that Leon's about to try out. God help us all.



5 MINUTES

Everything starts peacefully, with a small island made up of savannah, jungles, and coastal areas. My rise to godhood begins with a settlement called Spider Flatlands. And a lot of tutorials. While all I can really do is lean over the side of my cloud and shout at the people on the ground, there's a dense selection of stats and things to monitor. There are six main bits that need to be balanced, like sustenance, offspring, esteem and so on. There's also stuff like 'faith' which dictates how much people like my commandments, and 'doctrines', which dictate how much power I have over them. Basically, the more popular a god I am, the more 'influence' I have, which is effectively currency I can spend to issue orders. I'm not sure that's how godding works, if I'm honest. What's wrong with a good old-fashioned smiting to get my way?



0 MINUTES

I am so ready to become a god. I always thought the world would be a much better place if everything did what I told it, and now I have one where everything will. Crest's 'thing' is that you have no direct control over your minions; instead you hand down commandments that everyone follows. At least that's the idea. Think of something like Civilization, but instead of loads of menus and complex political options you just send postcards to Gandhi. ("Dear Gandhi, please lay off the nukes. cheers.") Crest uses an icon system for language so that verbs like 'produce' can be combined with "farm" to ask subjects to manufacture food, or "people" to encourage villagers to get with the baby making and increase my congregations. It's very much a 'guiding hand' idea rather than the wrath of... well, me.



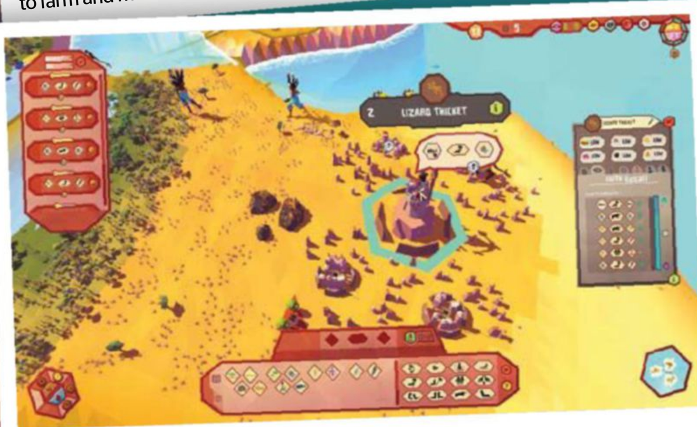
10 MINUTES

With the basics covered I get busy dictating commandments. I tell the worshippers of Spider Flatlands to make food and babies because both those things seem pretty essential to creating a bigger city. They soon get busy farming and reproducing by hitting the ground and each other respectively. 'Follower 5' and 'Follower 6' are born almost immediately after I make my will known, but I resist the urge to name them, as I know you're not supposed to do that with anything unless you want to get attached. Given my usual track record with this sort of game I might accidentally trigger the apocalypse, and if I change '5' and '6' to Bob and Susan it's going to be a lot more upsetting for me when they burn... *If* they burn. I mean if they burn. It's not a given. I'm good at godding, I promise.



15 MINUTES

Without warning I get the message that someone has died. There's a moment of panic as I wonder what part of "make food and babies" could have killed anyone, but it appears to be a tutorial thing as I'm told that the dead can advise me from the underworld, which sounds like a rubbish way to spend eternity. I check in on my new helper and a man who looks like he's dressed for an '80s roller disco tells me, and I quote, that "Maintainers has always valued custom over anything else". I... don't know what to do with that. The 'has' is disorientating enough but I've not seen anything yet where I can use 'Maintainers' or 'Custom'. All I can really do is tell people to farm and make babies. Maybe if I maintain that it'll become a custom?



30 MINUTES

I appear to be a benevolent deity. I've established another city near the ocean, called Lizard Thicket, so I told them to go and fish. Although I'm told that Follower 3 just ate Follower 4, which I definitely didn't suggest. All I've told people to do so far is farm, fish, and f... fornicate. Somehow starvation is an issue so I ordain that there should be trading and that some worshippers should migrate to the coast and try to re-establish Lizard Thicket. Commandments are rated depending on what people think of them and to distract everyone from all the starving I tell them to socialise. For some reason they hate that, which makes me think they like being miserable.



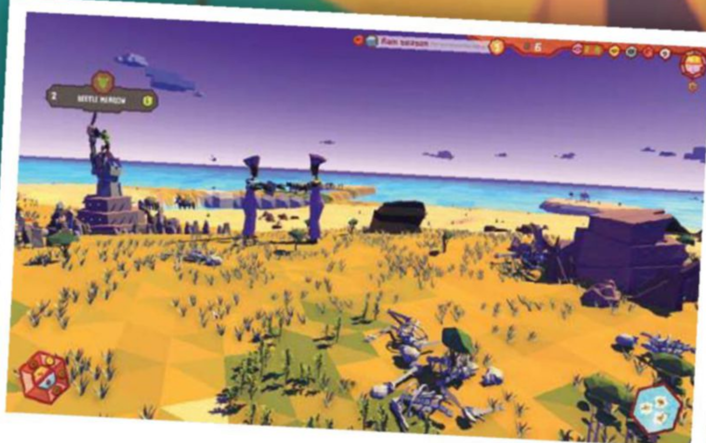
1 HOUR

I'm having problems being a god. All I can really do is give simple orders and hope for the best. There are some complicated-looking stats about needs and doctrines, or faith and followers but no way of telling how your commandments affect any of it. One of my cities seems to need more 'safety' but God knows how I'm supposed to do that, and considering I *am* God there's a problem. People keep starving despite my divine decrees that making food might help. I'm starting to wonder if this is why real gods get so upset with everyone – most of the time they're just telling people to be nice to each other and wondering where all the wars have come from.



2 HOURS

I'm getting bored and angry, which as far as I can tell from the Old Testament is par for the course for gods. The world is so lovely and I could watch the little people hunting antelope all day – it's like a beautiful interactive screen saver, and I feel just about as in control of it. Things go better when I leave them to it. Cities thrive and grow, no-one starves, and eating each other is at an all-time low. Most of the island is populated but I'm not sure what part I've played in that. For all my decreeing, things tick along. I've tried so many combinations: young people explore, old people trade, make gold, hunt hyenas – nothing seems to make that much difference.



3 HOURS

Given that being nice and helpful hasn't made much visible difference to my believers, I decide to test the boundaries by issuing a commandment that the old should eat the young. Mainly because I can't think of anything more destructive; it's only coincidence that I think of certain recent political developments as I decree it. Amazingly, it's received with universal approval. I decide that this is the world's way of telling me to end it all. I order every possible combination of people to eat or destroy the other. Soon the world is literally burning, as warriors walk the ashes. I kinda get why Satan has all the fun now. Before long I've razed all the buildings to the ground and the only people left are diplomats apologising to everyone about it all. Why haven't they eaten each other yet?

A GOD'S WORK IS NEVER DONE

It's hard not to be disappointed in Crest. It's such a beautiful world that we really wanted to like it. The idea of issuing commandments to guide a population is a neat twist. But despite the many layers of information, it's hard to make any obvious link between the godly wisdom you impart and its practical impact. It's never clear what your commandments are actually doing. It's one thing to create an ambient gaming experience but this is *so* ambient that it's hard to see if a player's presence is even needed. More obvious feedback is desperately needed, but considering this has been in Early Access over two years already it's not clear if that's ever going to happen.





THE WITCH IS BACK!

Bayonetta 3 announced, with the first two coming to Switch in Feb

The moment we feared might never come is here: Bayonetta 3 has been announced by developer Platinum Games. And continuing the fruitful relationship with Nintendo established with the second game, it's exclusive to Nintendo Switch.

Platinum has had a busy few years since the last the Bayonetta, releasing titles such as Transformers: Devastation, Star Fox Zero, and Nier: Automata. Its Xbox-exclusive Scalebound, however was unfortunately cancelled.

For anyone not in the know: the Bayonetta games revolve around the eponymous heroine, a witch who wields firearms and use her outfit made of her own hair (ew….) to cast spells and summon demons. Anyone looking to play the game had better be on board for non-stop bonkers shenanigans. The games follow her various battles with angels, demons, and even gods.

Since the last Bayonetta game hit shop shelves in 2014 the titular witch has only made an appearance in Super Smash Bros For Wii U, where she got to fulfil everyone's dream of duffing up Kirby, so a proper return is very welcome.

Few details have been announced for the third game yet but we can surely expect the same intense combat and spectacular, over-the-top visuals from this brawler. And we're hoping Bayonetta 3 will bring back the co-op mode from the second game, which saw the witch teaming up with her friend Jeanne.

Currently there's no release date for the title, but it has been confirmed that the first two games are coming to Switch as a bundle on the 16th of February. Bayonetta, the original, made its way to PC last year, but the second game was a Wii U exclusive and will remain tied to Nintendo consoles only. That second title also features its original amiibo support, with Nintendo-themed costumes and weapons unlockable by scanning appropriate figures, including gear inspired by Metroid and Star Fox.

> "WE CAN SURELY EXPECT THE SAME INTENSE COMBAT AND SPECTACULAR, OVER-THE-TOP VISUALS"

STATS MAGIC The gaming month in facts and figures

30
The Final Fantasy series turned 30 last year. The original game released in Japan on 18 December, 1987.

10 MILLION
Switch units sold in 2017. For comparison, Wii U only sold 13 million units during its entire lifespan.

80,000
Xbox One X managed to sell 80,000 units in its first week on sale. Sony's PS4 Pro only reached 50,000 in its first week.

25 MILLION
Rainbow Six Siege has been growing steadily since its rocky launch, reaching 25 million users across all platforms as of December 2017.





"Senua is made powerful, and we feel it through play, not exposition"

Sam Greer argues Hellblade's at its best not when it makes you miserable, but when it empowers you

Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice was a standout title last year, earning a spot in our top ten games of 2017. It resonated with many players because of its dark themes and disturbing imagery but for me, it was the moment when you acquired the titular sword that elevated the game. Warning: I'll be getting into spoilers here!

The game follows Senua, a Pict on a quest to resurrect her dead lover Dillion, whose head she carries about in a sack (and they say romance is dead), by travelling to Helheim, the Norse land of the dead. I hear it's lovely this time of year. On this journey she must battle both Vikings and visions that blur the line between what is truly supernatural and what is hallucination, making for one very uneasy adventure. Part horror and part hack-and-slash, Hellblade seeks to unnerve you for the majority of your journey, with your ears as well as your eyes playing tricks on you.

Halfway through the game, after a brief encounter with Hela, Viking goddess of the dead, Senua is left wounded and her sword broken. On the shores around Helheim, she finds another blade, however, embedded in the base of a tree, a sword said to be fit to slay gods. This is Gramr, whose name means 'wrath'. Senua must undergo several trials to acquire it, and these are some of the game's most haunting sections, but at the end she is able to wrench Gramr free. The moment she does, of course, she's plunged into hell.

Blade of gory

Visually this is the game's most repugnant area, the underworld depicted as a wall of corpses, arms reaching out trying to grab Senua as she wades through rivers of blood. But it's here where the horror subsides. Until now the game's combat has been a scrappy affair, with Senua winning often due to endurance. You dash and weave around your foes, beating them only after dozens of strikes. Yet with Gramr you gain more powerful attacks – the blade literally glows with power – and now you can take down enemies in one or two hits. Its blue light provides a welcome shine in the dark world of the game.

Here the game shifts to all-out-action as you carve your way through hell. Senua is made powerful and we feel this through play, not a cutscene or exposition. This is the turning point in the story and you sense that in spite of the odds, Senua is going to prevail.

Hellblade spends most of its time submerged in horrifying sounds and visions but it's these moments of empowerment that defined it for me and elevated it above 'misery porn'. Because what makes it such a powerful adventure is not how well it depicts the depths of mental illness, but how it offers catharsis. For anyone who empathises with Senua like I did, getting those moments of empowerment leaves quite the impression. Those moments gave me confidence and encouragement. For all its darkness, it's that glowing blade that I remember most strongly. ■

> "THE GAME SHIFTS TO ALL-OUT ACTION AS YOU CARVE YOUR WAY THROUGH HELL"

GM MOST WANTED

What's most tickling the team's fancy this month





ROBIN'S PICK

Biomutant

The word 'over-ambitious' does admittedly spring to mind with this sprawling open-world game, with its promises of allowing the player to do everything from crafting to kung fu, but it already looks charming enough to make up for the inevitable rough edges. I can't wait to scamper around the post-apocalypse as a little furry mutant, rewriting my own genetics on the fly to gain new skills and abilities.

PS4, XO, PC - Summer



SAM'S PICK

Shadow Of The Colossus

With the original being my favourite game of all time, I am absolutely buzzin' to get lost in the Forbidden Lands all over again. The completed visual makeover looks superb, and I'm keen to revisit areas to see just how much has changed. I'm also just really interested to hear the opinions from folks who are playing it for the first time, as there isn't really another game like it - when you get your hands on it, write in and tell me how you find it!

PS4 - 6 February



TEASEY DOES IT

Fumito Ueda has some impressive titles on his CV: Ico, Shadow Of The Colossus, and The Last Guardian. And a new image on his studio GenDesign's website hints that another game might be on its way. Giant monster fist, waif-like human, gloomy world? That sounds like classic Ueda. And classic Ueda is *goooood*. We just hope we've got enough time to stock up on tissues, as classic Ueda is also tearjerking.



NINE LIVES?

Peripheral maker Mad Catz is down to eight lives. The company filed for bankruptcy in March 2017, but is back with a new management team. The owners know their stuff, having worked in development and manufacturing for Mad Catz in its original incarnation.



ETERNAL REBELS

Remember the *other* Star Wars: Battlefront 2? Pandemic's one from 2005? It's still being updated. It got its online multiplayer back late last year, and that's now been tweaked to display Steam user names correctly and improve lobby functionality and ping calculations.



SEEING RED

Witcher developer CD Projekt Red has stamped out fears that Cyberpunk 2077 might include microtransactions. It tweeted: "When thinking CP2077, think nothing less than TW3 – huge single player, open world, story driven RPG. No hidden catch, you get what you pay for". We're spiking up our mohawks at the thought of this one…

Topping the leaderboard this issue



YOU WIN

YOU LOSE

No, we don't want to continue thanks



BEASTLY NEWS

Monster Hunter: World is coming to PC… this autumn. The console version of the game hits shelves just a day after this issue, meaning PC owners will have to endure months of their console-owning chums' conversations about organising hunts, tracking monsters, collecting bounties and more. The only consolation we can offer is this: the game looks fantastic, and we think it'll be well worth the wait.



RUSH TO THE END

By the time you read this, Gravity Rush 2's online servers will have shut down. In the weeks before the closure, fans were desperately playing to collect Dusty Tokens, which can be used to unlock tailsmans, gestures, and alternate costumes for Kat. As Sony has yet to confirm whether any of these items will be offered as DLC in future, or patched into the game, if you've missed the grind, you've missed out.



NOT A GAME

We all do stupid things when gaming, but there's a line, and 'swatting' crosses it. Swatting is where someone reports a fake crime to the police, drawing an armed response team to a location, and on 29 December it resulted in the death of a 28-year-old man in Wichita, USA, as police responded to what they thought was an ongoing hostage situation. The cause? An argument while playing Call Of Duty online. Sheer idiocy.



LAWBROKEN

Gravity-busting arena shooter LawBreakers has struggled since launch – unjustly, some might say – and in January publisher Nexon wrote it off, blaming the shortfall in sales on battle royale behemoth PlayerUnknown's BattleGrounds, which hit Early Access just before LawBreakers launched. Nexon said LawBreakers "accounts for the majority" of its $32.6 million (approx.) expenses in Q3 of 2017.

THE GM TO DO LIST

Crucial dates for your gaming diary. If you only do one thing this month, eat, but otherwise make a note of these events...



26/01

SAIYAN IT LOUD

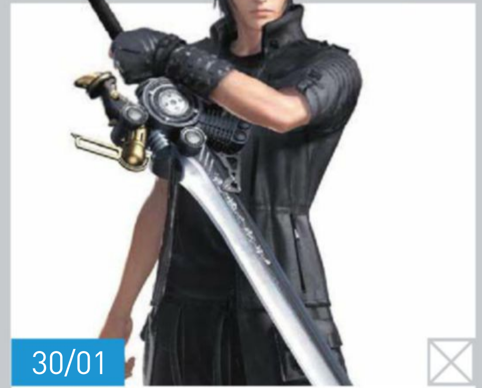
Why watch anime when you can play it? Dragon Ball FighterZ is out now.



26/01

MAKE A KILLING

Join hunters from all over the planet killing beasties in Monster Hunter: World today.



30/01

FF-FACE-OFF

Dissidia: Final Fantasy NT is out now. Ever wanted to batter Noctis? Now you can!



13/02

A HARD PLAY'S KNIGHT

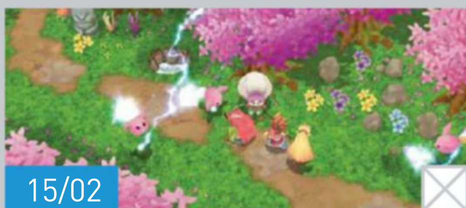
Hack your way across medieval Bohemia in Kingdom Come: Deliverance, out now.



14/02

VS DAY

It's a day for two-player co-op. (And not, as GM's editor insists, a day in his honour.)



15/02

MIND YOUR MANA

The worst-kept Secret in videogames is out today, in glorious remastered style.





20/02

ALL THE GEAR...

...and survival's the idea. Metal Gear Survive'll put your endurance skills to the test today.



22/02

HAPPY BIRTHDAY, US!

Grab issue 327 of GamesMaster and celebrate our 25th birthday with us!

INCOMING

Six big releases headed to a format near you...

01 **Bravo Team**
Format PS VR
Out 7 March

02 **Sea Of Thieves**
Format XO
Out 20 March

03 **Yakuza 6: The Song Of Life**
Format PS4
Out 20 March

04 **Attack On Titan 2**
Format Switch, PS4, XO
Out 20 March

05 **Ni No Kuni II: Revenant Kingdom**
Format PS4, PC
Out 23 March

06 **We Happy Few**
Format PS4, XO, PC
Out 13 April



REACH FOR THE STARS

Celebrating the storied history of a true gaming icon



An Italian plumber born on an island of dinosaurs, destined to save princesses and fight dragons… How could we have known, back in the days of the arcade, that this odd little fellow would one day be gaming's greatest legend?

Three decades on, Nintendo's lead franchise still shows no sign of slowing down, with both Super Mario Odyssey and Mario + Rabbids Kingdom Battle delighting players on Switch just last year. It's been quite the storied history along the way, from his humble beginnings as a carpenter to his thriving career in tennis, his rivalry with an oversized gorilla to competing at the Olympics…

There's never been a dull moment for Mario – join us as we take you through the years to celebrate a legacy like no other.



Who knew the tale of a love triangle between a man, woman, and gorilla would be what catapulted Nintendo's fortunes into the stratosphere? Donkey Kong was the start of the company's seemingly endless success, and was the debut of Mario, then called Jumpman.





2D OR NOT 2D

The side-scrolling platformers that defined the genre



Donkey Kong
1981
Arcade

Mario Bros
1983
Arcade

Super Mario Bros: The Lost Levels
1986
NES



Super Mario Land
1990
Game Boy

Super Mario Bros 3
1991
NES



Super Mario Bros
1987
NES

Wrecking Crew
1987
NES

Super Mario Bros 2
1989
NES



This is the game that defined Mario and popularised the side-scrolling genre. It established many of the concepts we consider core to the games today: collecting mushroom power-ups, jumping on enemies to kill them, that iconic theme tune, and more. To think this game was originally conceived as a shooter – no, really!

Among his many professions, Mario spent time in a demolition crew, where he showed his angry side, having to smash up every stone wall in each stage. His main foes were Gotchawrenches – part dinosaur, part wrench – and an Eggplant Man who wore a mask. Obviously.

Mini Mario & Friends: Amiibo Challenge
2006
Wii U, 3DS

Mario Vs Donkey Kong 2: March Of the Minis
2006
DS, 3DS



This surreal sequel rekindled an old rivalry – it tasked you with controlling multiple little wind-up Marios as they attempted to thwart Donkey Kong. The more Mini Marios that survived each stage, the greater your score .





Mario Vs Donkey Kong: Minis March Again
2009
DS, 3DS

New Super Mario Bros. Wii
2009
Wii

Wrecking Crew '98
1998
SNES

Mario vs Donkey Kong
2004
GBA

New Super Mario Bros. U
2012
Wii U

New Super Mario Bros. 2
2012
3DS

Super Mario Land 2: 6 Golden Coins
1993
Game Boy

Super Mario World 2: Yoshi's Island
1995
SNES



Mario And Donkey Kong: Minis On The Move
2013
3DS

Mario Vs Donkey Kong: Tipping Stars
2015
Wii U, 3DS

Super Mario All-Stars
1993
SNES



Super Mario Maker
2016
Wii U, 3DS

Super Mario Run
2017
Mobile

Super Mario World
1992
SNES

"MARIO PUNCHES YOSHI IN THE HEAD, MAKING HIM LAUNCH HIS TONGUE IN SURPRISE"



This Wii U spin-off allowed you to build your own levels, with a variety of themes drawn from Mario history. You had to be able to beat your own creations before you could share them, so you couldn't make an impossible level – Twitch streamer Failstream created a level so difficult it took him over two years to complete it.





The best side-scrolling Mario game – and perhaps the best 2D platformer ever. A timeless classic, its carefully designed levels are as satisfying to best now as they were at launch 25 years ago. Congrats, Super Mario World – you take the prize in our toughest category.

ALTERNATE DIMENSION

Mario made the leap to 3D look effortless – and continues to set the bar

Super Mario 64
1997
N64

Super Mario Sunshine
2002
GameCube

Super Mario Galaxy
2007
Wii



Mario went on holiday but hardly got a chance to rest. This tropical island needed him to clean up, using his powerful water gun, called FLUDD, to take down enemies and solve puzzles. It's here when series staples like Bowser Jr. and Toadsworth were first introduced, and where they, like all the game's characters, were fully voice-acted, something that hasn't been done in a Mario title since.



Mario went to spaaaaaace! And brought with him a host of new tricks, tackling galactic levels full of spherical worlds that gave this platformer a really unique 3D feel. The game was so good it became the first Nintendo title to be awarded the BAFTA for Best Game. Mario's signature jump attack was found not to function in the top-down perspective used to explore worlds, so the designers gave him a spin attack instead, which players could see more easily.

This was the game that changed everything. Transferring Mario's movement from 2D to 3D so perfectly still impresses as a real feat of design. From the way he moved to his signature jump, everything just felt spot-on. This is when many players first heard Charles Martinet as Mario's voice, as he has been ever since. It's also where Princess Toadstool was renamed Princess Peach.

Super Mario Galaxy 2

2010
Wii



Originally called Super Mario Galaxy More during development, this sequel expanded the scope of the previous game with dynamic levels that had multiple states – in some the direction of gravity shifted, and others even changed to the beat of the game's soundtrack. Yoshi also made an appearance, and in addition to his usual abilities, he could manipulate objects in the environment with his tongue. Ew.

3D and 2D brought together in harmony. It kept the free roaming kicked off in 64, but brought in elements from the 2D titles such as flagpoles. Chuck in four-player multiplayer (you could play as Mario, Luigi, Toad, Peach, and Rosalina) and you were sure to have a good time. This is also the game that gave us the adorable cat suit.



Super Mario 3D World

2013
Wii U

Super Mario Odyssey

2017
Switch

The name might've clued you in, but this latest entry in the series felt like a real journey, a relaxing holiday in your Switch. Each location boldly boasted its own distinct art style, mechanics, and tone, perfectly evoking the most exciting parts of being a foreigner in a foreign land. And that's before we even mention Cappy, whose powers of possession proved a perfectly imaginative new twist, totally changing our approach to every environment. Odyssey is the best 3D platformer Mario's ever been in, and that's fact.





Though it doesn't feature Mario's name in the title, nor is he named in-game, he was nonetheless found on the game's front cover, making this arguably his first sports title. It wouldn't be till 1999's Mario Golf that the series definitely became his own.

Mario's first-ever football game proved to be an incredible surprise, bringing together everything people look for in a Mario Sports title with real style. The sheer energy on display made this surprising and dynamic, and, quite simply, the best Mario sports title there is.



BEST OF THE BEST!

HAVING A BALL

A master of many sports

Golf
1984
NES

Tennis
1986
NES



Mario Golf
1999
N64

Mario Tennis
2000
N64

Mario Power Tennis
2004
GameCube

Mario Golf: Advanced Tour
2004
GBA

Mario Golf: Toadstool Tour
2004
GameCube

Mario Tennis Power Tour
2005
GBA



Mario Superstar Baseball
2005
GameCube

Mario Smash Football
2005
Gamecube



While Mario Tennis had been released on the Virtual Boy in Japan and America in 1995, this was Europe's first taste of Mario in what would become perhaps his most popular sports series. It's here that Waluigi made his debut, as Wario's doubles partner.



Mario's first foray into the world of baseball, which introduced staples like Power Shots. It also featured Chemistry, which showed good, bad, and neutral relations between characters. Finally we found out which Mario characters can't stand each other...





Developed by Square Enix as a follow up to its Mario Slam Basketball, not only did this introduce hockey, dodgeball, and volleyball to the Mario sports range, it actually featured some Final Fantasy guest characters too, including classic series mascot the Moogle.

Mario Super Sluggers
2008
Wii

Mario Strikers Charged Football
2007
Wii

Mario & Sonic At The Olympic Winter Games
2009
DS

Mario Sports Mix
2011



Mario & Sonic At The Olympic Games
2007
Wii

Mario & Sonic At The London 2012 Olympic Games
2011
Wii

Mario Tennis Open
2012
3DS

Mario Slam Basketball
2007
DS

Mario & Sonic At The Sochi 2014 Olympic Winter Games
2013
Wii U

Mario Golf World Tour
2014
3DS





Mario & Sonic At The Rio 2016 Olympic Games
2016
Wii U

Mario Tennis Ultra Smash
2015
Wii U



Mario Sports Superstars
2017
3DS



Poor Sonic hasn't enjoyed the success of his Italian peer, but in this officially licensed title Mario (feeling sorry for him, no doubt) decided to invite him along. With 24 events for the pair to compete in, there was plenty to do, and they went on to enjoy five more multisports titles in this series.





MUSH-VROOM KINGDOM

Mario's much-loved racers



This pioneer pushed the SNES to its limits to bring Mario to the world of racing. While it lacks the bells and whistles of later entries, it still holds up today as a remarkably timeless slice of local multiplayer action.

It may have been an expanded port of the Wii U version rather than a new karter in its own right, but Deluxe distinguished itself by serving as the perfect demonstration of Switch's capabilities. A full, uncompromised local multiplayer epic that you could play anywhere – absolutely magic.



Super Mario Kart
1992
SNES

Mario Kart 64
1997
N64



Mario Kart: Super Circuit
2001
GBA

Mario Kart: Double Dash
2003
GameCube

Mario Kart DS
2005
DS

Mario Kart Arcade GP
2005
Arcade

Mario Kart Arcade GP 2
2007
Arcade

Mario Kart Wii
2008
Wii

Mario Kart 7
2011
3DS

Mario Kart Arcade GP DX
2013
Arcade

Mario Kart 8
2014
Wii U

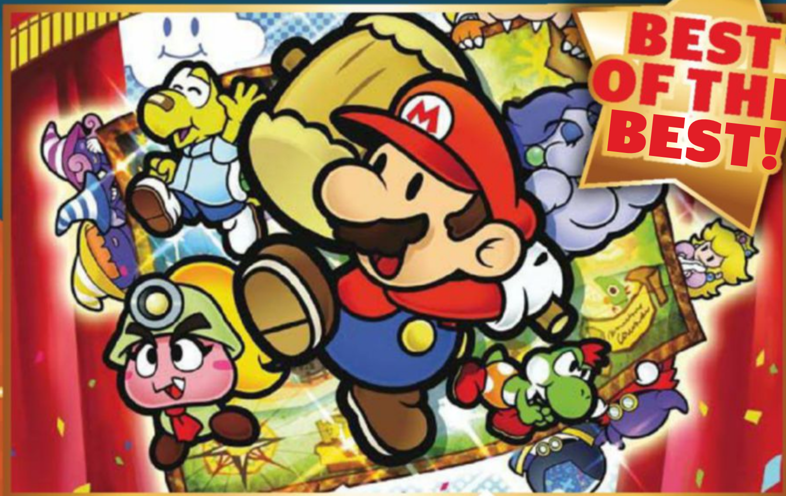


Mario Kart Arcade GP VR
2017
Arcade

Mario Kart 8 Deluxe
2017
Switch



This handheld entry allowed players to connect with each other's DSs for multiplayer wherever and whenever. That may seem quaint in this era of ubiquitous online play, but at the time it was a revelation – and it's portable local multiplayer experiences such as this that planted the seeds of Switch.



A world packed with imagination and creativity – and most importantly of all, lovable characters. Thousand Year Door's intricate, expansive take on the Mario RPG formula remains the gold standard for the series – one that it's never matched since.

Super Mario RPG: Legend Of The Seven Stars 1996 SNES

Paper Mario 2001 N64

Mario & Luigi: Superstar Saga 2003 GBA

Paper Mario: The Thousand Year Door 2004 GameCube

Mario & Luigi: Partners In Crime 2005 DS

Super Paper Mario 2007 Wii

Mario & Luigi: Bowser's Inside Story 2008 DS

Paper Mario: Sticker Star 2012 3DS

Mario & Luigi: Dream Team 2013 3DS

Mario & Luigi: Paper Jam 2015 3DS

Paper Mario: Color Splash 2016 Wii U



This title developed by Square (later to become Square Enix) was the first to bring the heroic plumber into the world of turn-based battles. It gave us a whole new perspective on Mario – an isometric one, to be exact – and its timed attacks became a mainstay of future Mario RPGs.

BOB-OMBS & BOWSERS

The fantastical role-playing games







A strange game, even for Mario; it saw the brothers sucked inside Bowser's body. From there they had to co-operate and help him fight the evil Fawful, who had taken over the Mushroom Kingdom. An emphasis on comedy in its combat made fights particularly memorable.

'TACHE BASH

Nearly two decades of non-stop partying

There ain't no party like a Mario party. For two decades Nintendo has been putting out titles in what is surprisingly one of Mario's longest-running series. Party games bring together characters from across the franchise, then set them against each other (and Bowser) in dozens of mini-games. Remember when you had to guess which Shy Guy had the most doughnuts on his head? Good times.

Mario Party
1998
N64

Mario Party 2
1999
N64

Mario Party 3
2000
N64

Mario Party 4
2002
GameCube

Mario Party 5
2003
GameCube

Mario Party 6
2004
GameCube

Mario Party 7
2005
GameCube

Mario Party Advance
2005
GBA

Mario Party DS
2007
DS

Mario Party 8
2007
Wii

Mario Party 9
2012
Wii

Mario Party: Island Tour
2013
3DS

Mario Party 10
2015
Wii U

Mario Party: Star Rush
2016
3DS

Mario Party: The Top 100
2017
3DS





DR MARIO IS IN

Mario's most puzzling titles

The series' brain-teasing spin-offs might not be as numerous as the party games but they're nonetheless an enduring staple of the franchise. From stints dishing out medicine, to running his own hotel, the puzzle games have added to Mario's vast list of careers quite unlike any other series.



Dr. Mario
1991
NES



Hotel Mario
1994
Philips CD-i

Mario's Picross
1995
Game Boy



Mario's Super Picross
1995
Super Famicom

Dr. Mario 64
2001
N64



Dr. Mario Online Rx
2008
Wii

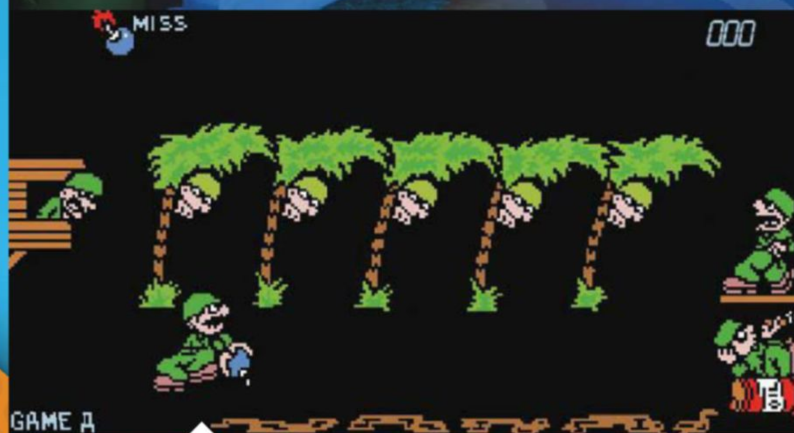
Dr. Mario Express
2009
DS



SUPER MARIO'S ODDITIES

And you thought the others were weird...

A remarkably bizarre title even within the scope of the Mario series, this unexpected crossover turned out to be an extra-special delight. Combining the tactical combat of XCOM with the imagination of Mario and the manic energy of Ubisoft's Rabbids series has proven to be a recipe for complete success.



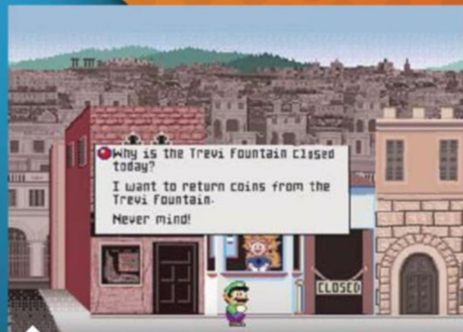
Did you know Mario served in what appears to be the Vietnam War? The goal of the game was to transport bombs through enemy territory.

Mario's Bombs Away
1983
Game & Watch

In what must surely be the low point of Mario's career choices, he spent this game as a juggler. He tossed everything from balls and bombs, to – impressively – stars.

Mario The Juggler
1991
Game & Watch

Mario's Time Machine
1993
PC, SNES, NES



Though Mario was present, Luigi took centre stage in this educational title as he attempted to rescue his brother. A follow-up, Mario's Time Machine, was released in 1993.

Mario Is Missing!
1992
PC, SNES, NES

Mario + Rabbids Kingdom Battle
2017
Switch

Super Mario 128
Cancelled

This was the envisioned follow up to the classic Mario 64. A demo was shown at Nintendo's Space World trade show in 2000 in which, bizarrely, a giant 2D Mario split into 128 tiny 3D Marios. Why? We may never know.



Hunting deer on quad-bikes, while an eagle hunts you from above. The Far Cry food chain captured in all its glory.

"THE LILTING, MOODY GUITAR BRINGS HOME THE 'FRONTIER' FEELING THAT FAR CRY 5 INTRODUCES"



Format PS4, XO, PC **Publisher** Ubisoft
Developer Ubisoft Montreal **ETA** 27 March

FAR CRY 5

Getting lost in the beautiful, hostile wilderness of Hope County

For our latest hands-on, we're let truly off the leash in Hope County, Montana. With the freedom to drive, fly, and zipline around a third of Far Cry 5's sardonically-named setting, we experience the contrast to the rugged terrain of its recent predecessors.

The flat sprawl of Montana's fields is impressive, and the distant mountains are low enough that the sky dominates the horizon, doing digital justice to the 'Big Sky Country' moniker that the state prides itself on. But the openness is also daunting, making you feel exposed and vulnerable, a bit like the Savannah regions of Far Cry 2, except with the helicopters of a fanatical Christian militia hovering overhead.

You rarely feel safe in Far Cry 5. Unlike the disinterested mercenaries of Far Crys gone by, or the tribesfolk of Primal, whose priority was food and survival, the Eden's Gate cultists are as bloodthirsty as the wildlife, driven by righteous rage against *you*, who they perceive to stand between God and themselves. We experience this first-hand when, driving just a couple of hundred feet beyond the perimeter of a friendly town, we're swiftly beset by enemies blabbering Biblical mumbo-jumbo.

Free-wheeling

With the help of the improved weapon wheel, which lets you instantly change firing modes and bullet types, we shoot our way out of the ambush, then head out to visit local conspiracy crackpot Larry Parker. We arrive to find him stuck in the middle of a electric 'forcefield' that

Let's Cry together

The misadventures of playing co-op

Desecrate graveyards

Armed with a flamethrower and grenade launcher, we take on a mission to protect memorials from waves of cultists. The memorials survive, the cultists don't...



Blame each other

With one of us driving a pickup truck and the other in the cargo bed, we try to save a civilian being held up by a cultist. Within seconds both are dead. No-one says anything, but it was definitely *his* fault.



Shoot each other

You can settle disputes like the above by switching friendly fire on. Make some games out of it, such as tractor shotgun jousting, or a destruction derby in a field where the first car to explode loses.

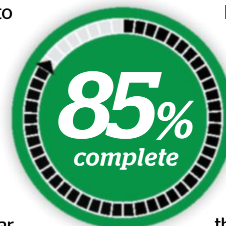


Make life easier?

There's no difficulty scaling in co-op, so the game is technically easier. However, your increased efficiency means that the resistance meter will fill up quicker, making the cult more aggressive.



he's created to keep 'Them' (Lizardmen, Illuminati, take your pick) away. We switch off the generators so Larry, a man with grimy glasses and unintentional dreadlocks, can escape his undeniably effective invention. As he rambles on about government mind control and radio towers, a cultist chopper emerges over the treeline, forcing us to duck low. It's a timely reminder that, as much as we sympathise with Larry's paranoid predicaments, we need to prioritise reducing Eden's Gate's influence in the area.



The process will be familiar to Far Cry veterans: the map is largely under the control of the baddies and you must wrest it back into the hands of the goodies by completing missions and capturing outposts (in this case petrol stations, villages, and, it would seem, pumpkin farms). There are three regions, each controlled by a different member of the Seed family, which you can tackle – along with their story arcs – in any order.

The all-new resistance meter gives another twist to the Far Cry formula. As you rough up the cult, the local populace will get inspired by your actions in a given region, then rise up in arms against Eden's Gate. Naturally, the cult will respond violently, which will steadily turn each region into an all-American civil warzone before you topple the local Herald and pacify it for good. These aren't just mindless skirmishes, either, but systems that have a tangible impact on the territorial map, as resistance fighters can capture outposts even while you're pratting about in a wingsuit on the other side of the map.

We didn't have time to see these long-term effects in our hands-on, so set about taking some territory ourselves. At night time, we pick up a distress call from a place called Rae Rae's Pumpkin Farm, but get swiftly waylaid, which gives the game a chance to show off its systems. Case in point: we pick up a grenade launcher from a wandering salesman, and, as fate would have it, a helicopter almost immediately buzzes into view. Fed up of feeling like twitchy Ray Liotta in the latter half of Goodfellas, we line the 'copter up in the lower part of our sights and *poom*, send a perfectly arched ball of fun right into its rotors. It plummets into the woods at the roadside, causing one of Far Cry's trademark fast-spreading fires.

As we're admiring the carpet of fiery carnage rolling out before us, a shape hurtles towards us out of those same woods. We see, too late, that it's a bear, presumably hacked off that we just firebombed its home. With no time to compose ourselves, we fire a grenade uselessly over its head before it proceeds to maul us to within an inch of our lives. We manage to scramble back into our pickup truck, and speed off into the night. Through our trauma, we can at least confirm (as if it was ever in doubt) that Far Cry 5 is as every bit much of a ludicrous guns-and-nature playground as its predecessors.

"THE LOCAL POPULACE WILL RISE UP IN ARMS, WHICH WILL STEADILY TURN EACH REGION INTO AN ALL-AMERICAN CIVIL WARZONE"

Cry of the wild

Back on track, we cut through some woods in search of a shortcut – watching out for bears this time – but underestimate the ruggedness of the terrain. The car flips, crashes into a tree, and we're left cursing the time we're about to waste schlepping through the forest when we should be blowing up evil cultists, running over cows, or indulging in all manner of other wholesome local pursuits.



The enemy is more vicious than ever in Far Cry 5, and that definitely includes the animals. Just look at this big boy – that moose has murder in his eyes.



You can team up with AI Guns For Hire at the same time as real-life buddies from your friends list, making for some vicious skirmishes.

The cultists pursue you relentlessly, and are more dangerous to fight against than the rank-and-file enemies of previous Far Cry games.

The outposts in Far Cry 5 are authentic locations, such as petrol stations, lumber yards, and pumpkin farms. Yep, pumpkins are big business in Montana.

But despite our bruises, it's on this trek that we finally find some peace away from the choppers, gunfire, and gospel music on the car radio. This series' skill at depicting light interacting with trees is on full display, as the radial rays of morning soak into the svelte pine trunks and swaying dandelions underfoot. It *sounds* lovely too, as a lilting, moody guitar track brings home that wild, western 'frontier' feeling that Far Cry 5 introduces. At the same time, it's the most pronounced iteration of that most familiar of Far Cry motifs: the tension between picture-perfect holiday getaways and explosive violence.

Cult classic

Yes, we make it to the farm eventually, but the story of how we take it is one that Far Cry players are well versed in (tagging enemies, stealth, releasing a vicious caged animal...). It's routine stuff, just much prettier and incrementally slicker. With Ubisoft content to sit on those foundations, Far Cry 5's success will be measured in terms of the setting, comical characters, and quotable villains.

We can't yet speak for the latter, as we didn't come face to face with a big bad in our play time, but we can say that Hope County is a hell of a place, its unique topography and rampant populace pushing us out of the comfort zone that we settled into with the last few entries in the series. ■ ***Robert Zak***

GM Instant Reaction

\+ The new sprawling setting is not only stunning, it changes your dynamic with enemies, and makes the world feel more hostile.

– Formulaic missions and capturing outposts continue to be the bread and butter, but is the bread starting to go stale?

THRILL-O-METER

1 2 3 4 5

Montana is looking more and more like a natural fit for the series.



The action may be in the foreground, but we're more interested in that crop circle in the background – Alien DLC confirmed? Maybe Larry's on the right track after all.





Francis, Foxy, and Lancewing are giving us a serious Neverending Story-meets-Build-A-Bear vibe.

Format PS4 **Publisher** Sony **Developer** Media Molecule **ETA** Autumn

DREAMS

LittleBigPlanet's spiritual successor is going to turn you into a game designer







Calling Media Molecule's latest a game seems disingenuous. Building on the 'Play, Create, Share' theme of LittleBigPlanet, this truly astonishing follow-up allows you to conjure up pretty much anything and everything you can think of. It even has an in-engine music creator. And in case you think that's just big talk, Media Molecule built the entire story mode with the game's own tools.

"There's absolutely no cheating, we haven't used external software to produce assets and import it in. We've made everything from an atomic level using a DualShock 4 and a PlayStation 4" says creative director Mark Healey about 'Art's Dream', the developer-created story that will ease players into this huge universe.

The demo we're invited to check out is split between three interconnecting strands, each one offering something a little different. There's the warm glow of the sci-fi thread, where a small robot called Debug seeks to rid his world of a virus, which sees him jumping around the environment onto pressure pads. Alongside it is a more traditional-looking platformer where you control Francis and Foxy as they attempt to save their chubby-faced flying dragon Lancewing.

Art gallery

What piques our interest the most, though, is a section which is more of a point-and-click adventure. Here, we see a well-suited man (the titular Art, to be precise) as he attempts to board a train. A rude conductor refuses to let him on without a ticket, and you need to solve some light puzzles to nab one. It's the earliest sign of how Dreams expands on LittleBigPlanet, where

"DREAMS EXPANDS ON LITTLEBIGPLANET – DIFFERENT GENRES CAN EASILY BE CREATED"





There'll be a beta launched before the official release, although Media Molecule is keeping quiet on when it'll launch.

70% complete

different genres can easily be created with the tools at everyone's disposal.

Yes, creation is at the heart of this, and the tools Media Molecule shows off are simple enough to grasp, yet eye-widening in scope. Let's say you want something completely original? Well, the in-game art tools allow you to create environments, characters, and so on using tools such as paint brushes, or sculpting with the DualShock 4 or Move controllers. Once you have a few things for your Dream, you can place these assets into the level designer and build your world from there.

However, if you're more of a remixer, then you can go into the 'Dreamverse' and download assets other users make. You can add and reuse whatever you find in this wonderful library. We see a small, rocky island become a much bigger one as Healey grabs it, quickly copies, and then pastes it to create a much larger area and seamlessly provide a backdrop. Then he takes a platform and shows us how easy it is to create animations for Dreams. All you do is start recording on the animation timeline, move whatever it is in the way you want it to and stop recording. Voila, we now have a floating platform and a tangible sense of how to create a game in Dreams.

This is just the start of what the game can offer. We also get to see how you can create your own soundtrack using in-game instruments or record your own dialogue with the PlayStation Camera's mic. The potential of what is on offer is staggering.

Mind over matter

Finding levels is a doddle thanks to the in-game search engine's ability to auto-play player-created content – and, in a sign of just how broad Dreams really is, there's also a role for people who want to curate their favourite content. You'll have the option to make playlists of your favourite levels or assets and develop your brand as a tastemaker, with other players, creators, and curators able to give their thumbs up to your lists.

Simply put, there's nothing like Dreams at the moment. The possibilities of what you can make seem endless, and there's plenty to satisfy those who don't quite feel up to creating their own masterpiece just yet. With this biggest glimpse yet into Media Molecule's mind, we're already drawing up plans for what we'll be magicking up later this year. ■ ***Ben Tyrer***

GM Instant Reaction

+ The scope of the creation tools is vast, but they still seem accessible to use. This could be revolutionary.

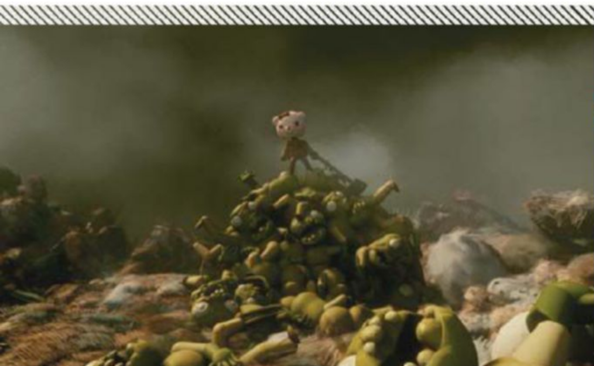
– The only thing disappointing us is that we're still waiting on a date for the beta. We want to get our hands on this now...

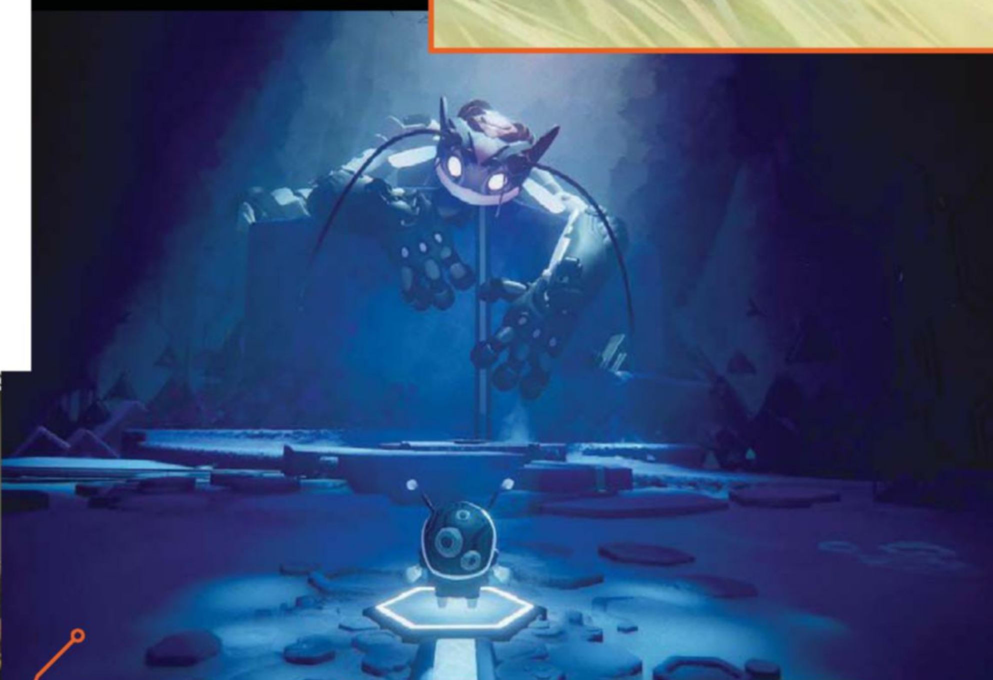
THRILL-O-METER



We can't wait to see what's made with this astonishing engine.







The Media Molecule-created story levels give off a much darker vibe than LittleBigPlanet. Although tiny, virus-battling robot Debug looks adorable, this robo-cat-thing is the stuff of nightmares.


The new art style is a clever evolution of the pixel art look of games past.


Expect plenty of platforming in the style of the classic Mega Man games. Which means, if you're anything like us, you should also expect to die a lot...


Imagine that, fighting a living JCB. What will games think of next?





GM Instant Reaction

+ The visuals are slick, and it seems to retain the charm of classic Mega Man, with some fun new additions to the formula.

– The dreadful Mighty No 9 has shaken our faith in Mega Man-style games... hopefully this doesn't make the same mistakes.

THRILL-O-METER

1 2 3 4 5

We're cautiously optimistic about this old school revival.






It seems like Mega Man's full arsenal of abilities and moves has been kept intact – and we're hoping for some exciting additions to keep things fresh.

Format Switch, PS4, XO, PC **Publisher** Capcom
Developer Capcom **ETA** Autumn

MEGA MAN 11

The robot's back, to prove blue can be the new black

Capcom's beloved hero is returning to battle Dr Wily and his army of robots once again, in his first numbered sequel in seven years. After 10 previous games, you know what to expect: side-scrolling platforming, inventive boss battles, and an arsenal of bizarre powers. Where this new installment *is* breaking away from tradition is in its art style – pixels are out, and slick 2.5D visuals are in.

Capcom's been doing well when it comes to reinventing its classic franchises recently, with Resident Evil switching to first-person (and VR) and Monster Hunter going global, so we're optimistic it'll be able to successfully update our favourite blue robot too. It's certainly going to need some twists if it's going to feel fresh in a modern context – footage so far errs towards the expected, but we're hoping Capcom's got some surprises for us up its sleeves.



Major malfunction

The new visuals unfortunately do remind us of the already quite battered and bruised Mighty No 9, a crowdfunded spiritual follow-up to Mega Man which left fans more than a little disappointed when it released in 2016. Its rough edges and lack of character were a far cry from what had been pitched during the game's Kickstarter.

Mega Man 11 seems to be much more the game fans had hoped Mighty No 9 would be – but that title certainly demonstrated that it's not necessarily an easy formula to get right. So far, though, this official effort is looking rather slicker and more polished than its crowdfunded contemporary. The high standard shown in the latest footage suggests Capcom is really putting the work in with this series – fans, we give you full permission to get optimistic. ■ *Sam Greer*

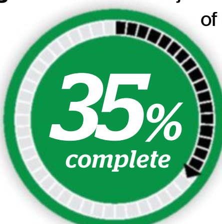
Koj says "the baby relates to game mechanics", but we still don't know how it ends up in Reedus' throat.

Format PS4 **Developer** Kojima Productions
Publisher Sony **ETA** Autumn 2019

DEATH STRANDING

Baby's interplanetary day out is madder than any Metal Gear Solid

Skyscraper-sized beasties! Slightly smaller beasties that can levitate, Psycho Mantis style! Babies hiding inside Norman Reedus' larynx! The most recent footage for Hideo Kojima's utterly befuddling adventure is as exciting as it is confusing. And hoo boy are Death Stranding's latest details confounding.



Kojima's latest trailer for his first post-Konami project is eight electrifying, bonkers minutes, all captured in real-time on a PS4 Pro. Not only does the gorgeous footage prove Kojima Productions is putting Guerilla Games' Decima engine to exquisite use, it somehow manages to out-crazy the trailer from 2016's PlayStation Experience... and that had Mads Mikkelsen bleeding oil from his eyeballs.

Whereas that teaser seemed to be set on some war-ravaged corner of Earth, the latest action appears to have gone interplanetary. As The Walking Dead actor and chums brave the constantly lashing downpour on a barren, bleak world, the otherworldly imagery recalls Alien's ghastly LV-426. This place seems just as unfriendly, too. Moments after we learn the name of Reedus' character – 'Sam Porter', judging by the etchings on his space suit – his colleagues are dragged away by invisible creatures.

How these monsters affect the action is unclear, but in an interview with IGN, Kojima lifted the lid on other elements of Death Stranding. The Metal Gear mastermind says "death will never pull you out of the game," and intriguingly, the player can leave their corpse if they die, at which point they're free to explore a submerged purgatory, before returning to where their corpse dropped.

Equally fascinating is that rain we mentioned. Called Timefall, it has the power to manipulate (you guessed it) time, such as making plants grow in seconds. Magic precipitation, invisible bogeymen, and an underwater afterlife? That sure sounds like a Kojima game. Whether Death Stranding will be an MGSV-aping stealth epic, you'll just have to wait and see. ■ ***Dave Meikleham***

GM Instant Reaction

\+ The game's stunning cutscenes show Horizon Zero Dawn's engine still packs an incredible graphical punch.

– We still don't know what type of game Death Stranding actually is, and it seems doubtful it'll launch before late 2019.

THRILL-O-METER



As captivating as it is strange, let's hope for concrete details soon.







After Sam is seemingly killed by a massive kaijū-like creature, he awakens naked, in a submerged crater. We've all been there, right?

Will you risk the mission to save one agent, especially knowing that they could secretly be working against you?

Format PS4, XO, PC **Publisher** Good Shepherd Entertainment **Developer** CreativeForge Games **ETA** Autumn

PHANTOM DOCTRINE

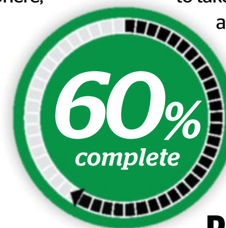
Playing the spymaster in this tense, XCOM-inspired sneak 'em up



Not many games attempt to capture the spirit of the Cold War period – double-agents, MKUltra, interrogations beneath solitary light bulbs. Phantom Doctrine goes there, in the form of a turn-based strategy game that's like a sneakier version of XCOM, or grittier take on Invisible Inc. You're in charge of a spy agency, unaffiliated with any government and made up of procedurally generated outcasts from the KGB, CIA, and Mossad. Every dirty trick in the spy handbook is on the table as you try to foil a conspiracy to make the Cold War a whole lot hotter.

In your dank safe house, you assign agents to clandestine operations, from forging money, to body engineering that boosts their physical traits, to brainwashing enemy agents. There's even a pinboard where you piece together intel, spilled secrets, and other documentation using pins and a piece of string. It's authentically unglamorous, like a John le Carré story but without the neat hair and crisp suits.

Your work at the safe house builds towards tactical turn-based missions all around the northern hemisphere, which play out like a more Machiavellian XCOM. You can arm your agents with all manner of weapons but, as we discovered in our hands-on, this should be a last resort, because a single unsilenced bullet can throw the entire mission into jeopardy.



We use our intel to work out that 'The Conspiracy' is plotting to take down a commercial airliner. Our mission is to infiltrate one of its outposts and disrupt the communications needed to carry out the attack.

We have four people on the job, all sorted with counterfeit KGB IDs that ensure their free passage around most – though not all – of the compound. With eggs and baskets in mind, we split the group up. One agent – the only one with full access to the compound – goes to the security room to turn off the cameras, another sneaks through an off-limits area to take out a watchtower guard, and a third circumnavigates the three-storey building from the other side to watch for guards. The main task is up to Raven, who makes for the top floor of the building to disable the radio.

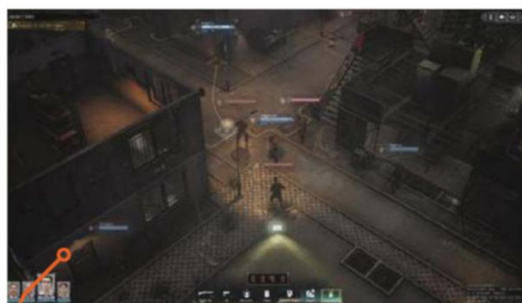
Raven paradox

After thwacking a guard at the bottom of the stairs, Raven is confronted with her first major obstacle, and an opportunity to use her first special ability. There is a guard at the top of the stairs. If we try to rush him, we'll get shot at point-blank range. Thankfully, our comms expert (lead designer Kacper Szymczak) is on





You can catch enemy spies and reprogram them using nasty mind tricks. Unfortunately you don't have it all your own way – your opponents have access to the same dirty tactics, so you'll have to keep your own agents safe from capture.



Like an old, slightly faded film reel, Phantom Doctrine has a murky grey hue that suits the Cold War setting



The decor reflects where in the world you are. Though this being Russia, that rug should really be hanging on the wall...





hand to point out one of our many tricks: an off-map sniper who can silently despatch an exposed enemy – and this guard just happens to be right next to a window. We take the shot, the guard drops, and Raven heads upstairs.

While the other agents are quietly clearing out guards, Raven runs into an enemy agent, codenamed Theremin. It's an awkward moment. But then it dawns on us: we know this agent. We caught her in a previous mission and brainwashed her at the safe house. A simple utterance of our 'Trigger Word' ability, and she flips to our side. Leaving Theremin to snoop around for intel for future missions, Raven makes it to the top floor and deactivates the radio. Mission complete? Not quite, because as our agents head for the evacuation point, all hell breaks loose.

Sapphire and squeal

Sapphire, the operative we sent around the building, starts shooting. Not out of panic, no, but with full deadly intent *at our own team*. She was a double agent all along, and our failure to sniff her out proves fatal. Luckily, she's far enough from the other spies that her nefarious task isn't easy (eggs and baskets, people), but the cacophony of her machine gun fire calls in enemy reinforcements.

"IT'S AUTHENTICALLY UNGLAMOROUS, LIKE A JOHN LE CARRÉ STORY BUT WITHOUT THE NEAT HAIR AND CRISP SUITS"

We're scampering now, trying to end each turn behind barrels, by walls, and away from windows. We could complete the mission by evacuating just one agent, but that means the rest will either die, be forced to make their own escape, or get caught and flip to the enemy side, returning to haunt us in later missions.

One of our operatives gets gunned down with terrifying precision by Sapphire, while Raven and another limp wounded to the evac zone. As the guards descend on the building and an attack helicopter appears on the scene, we decide to leave Theremin behind and complete the mission. We probably shouldn't trust her anyway. In fact, we're not sure we trust anyone any more.

The success of Phantom Doctrine will depend on how its mechanics, mission variety, and emergent stories sustain across multiple campaigns, but it's already proving effective at planting the seeds of paranoia, making for a very intriguing foundation. ■ ***Robert Zak***

GM Instant Reaction

+ Just half an hour left us twitchy with paranoia, which is how a game about cat-and-mouse espionage *should* feel.

– We've yet to see little touches that give agents personality, which is crucial if we're to care whether they live or die.

THRILL-O-METER

1 2 3 **4** 5

Has the atmosphere and mechanics to become a Cold War classic.



The same slick, striking visuals return, but with a better variety of locations.



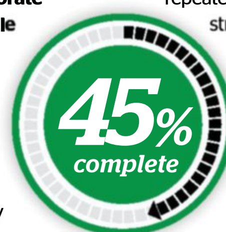
Format PC **Publisher** Superhot Team
Developer Superhot Team **ETA** Autumn

SUPERHOT: MIND CONTROL DELETE

Definitely not mind, copy, and paste

The original 'time only moves when you do' first-person shooter, Superhot, was quite the surprise. The central mechanic led to each elaborate setpiece being a little puzzle box – but one where solving it was akin to choreographing a John Wick-esque fight scene.

Enter Mind Control Delete, now available in Steam Early Access. This standalone expansion takes Superhot's central mechanic and visual style and adapts it to an entirely new structure. Instead of a series of finely-tuned, hand-crafted set pieces, you are offered a series of sandbox-like levels tied into a progression system. You can unlock playable characters with unique abilities (one of the two currently available is able to swap bodies with foes) and choose different power-ups.



The shift from intricately constructed but small tableaux to more open, freer, and much larger environments has transformed Superhot from a puzzle game into more of a proper action title. Death doesn't entail restarting a scenario, repeatedly trying and varying your strategy until you execute a perfect plan. Instead it means starting over in a completely different stage. Coupled with the sandbox nature of levels, where you've got weapons scattered everywhere and enemies coming from all sides, Mind Control Delete forces you to improvise rather than learn the correct way to get through a scenario.

While the elegant, minimalist graphical style looks similar to the original game, it doesn't play the same. Whether you approve of the emphasis on action will depend on your personal taste, but the result is something that does feel distinct from its predecessor in a significant way. ■ ***Sam Greer***





GM Instant Reaction

\+ Brings something new and exciting to the Superhot formula, delivering a tense action game instead of puzzles.

– If what you really liked about the original was the puzzling aspect, this isn't going to deliver more of what you loved.

THRILL-O-METER



It's different, but it's every bit as engaging and stylish as the original.



GM MOST WANTED

Format PC **Publisher** 10 Chambers Collective
Developer 10 Chambers Collective **ETA** Autumn

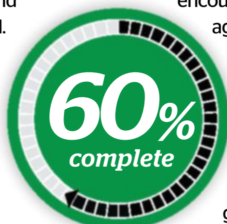
GTFO

Come for the acronym, stay to slaughter the creepy monsters

Those letters must stand for 'Gosh, That's Frightfully Ominous'. Four players make their way through a dimly-lit, claustrophobic underground facility, things suspiciously quiet. Needless to say, it doesn't stay that way. An alarm is triggered, monsters arrive, and the shooting begins.

Ostensibly an FPS, GTFO promises more than mindless shooting. Developer 10 Chambers Collective is headed by Ulf Andersson, the main chap behind Payday. There's no bank to rob here, but co-operation between you and your three teammates is vital. That doesn't just mean concentrated firepower. "If you merely 'stay together' or 'shoot together' you'll just die in a pretty formation," says Andersson.

We're promised a mixture of exploring, puzzle solving, and good ol' fashioned baddie shooting. It's all held together with a script from Adam Gascoine, writer of Doom. Add on to *that* the intriguing-sounding Expedition Director, which helps each session feel unique, and we have a co-op shooter oozing potential like a freshly-slaughtered monster oozing its inside bits. Or something.

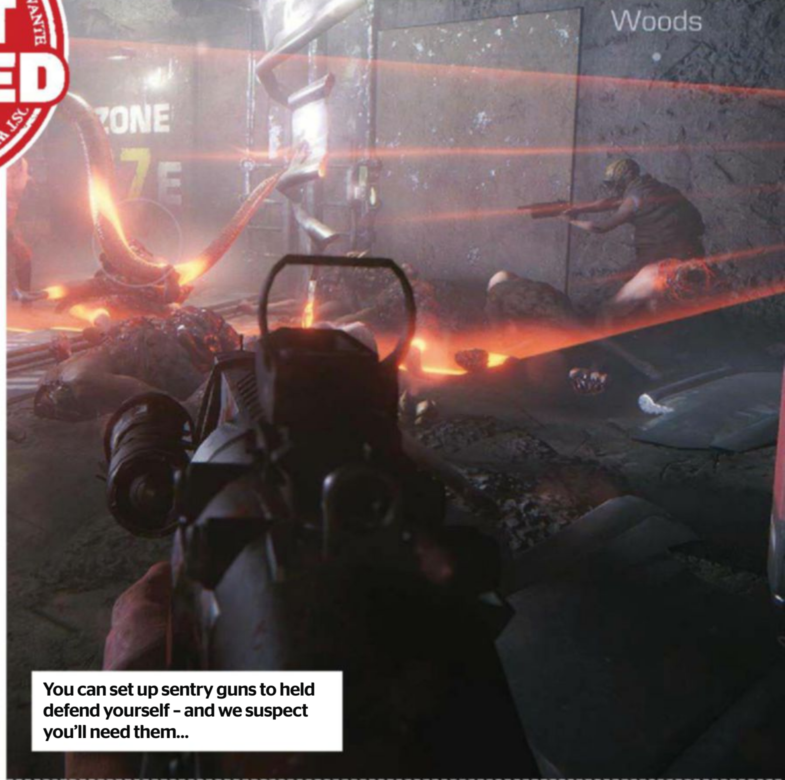


OMG SOS

The environments revealed have a grimy, industrial, Alien vibe. Indeed, various welcome influences seem to be at play. The murderous monsters seem halfway between Killing Floor's zombies and a Clive Barker creation, and the Expedition Director has a whiff of Left 4 Dead about it. Whether all the tentacles are influenced by '80s anime or a bad seafood experience is up for debate.

In general gameplay terms, the emphasis is on finding ways to encourage players to come back again and again. Andersson is confident that 10 Chambers Collective has got this nailed, as he asserts that "the unpredictability and replayability of GTFO is unrivalled in the co-op FPS genre – you and your teammates will never know your way or where the monsters are." A bold claim indeed; let's hope he's not all toothy mouth and no combat trousers.

We like sci-fi flavoured horror, and we like an excuse to shoot stuff. We want this GTFOver here. ■ ***Luke Kemp***



You can set up sentry guns to held defend yourself – and we suspect you'll need them...

GM Instant Reaction

+ This just might be the co-op Aliens game we always wanted but never got. But, you know, without the Aliens.

– Plenty of lofty and impressive claims, but little of the game has been revealed. Can it really walk the walk?

THRILL-O-METER

1 2 3 4 5

The potential's coming out of the goddamn walls with this one.











Expect some tentacular encounters when the game releases some time this year. Don't get sucker punched, because tentacles... suckers... never mind.



This shot doesn't, as you might have suspected, show a hidden fashion show side mode. *Or does it?!?* No. No, it doesn't.



Format PC **Publisher** Star Drifters
Developer Star Drifters **ETA** Summer

DRIFTLAND: THE MAGIC REVIVAL

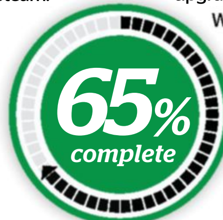
Exploring the sky on her Majesty's strategic service



ou just can't trust wizards. You barely have to turn your back for five minutes before they're scrapping with each other, summoning up otherworldly horrors, and warping the fabric of time and space. Get enough of them together and it's only a matter of time before they blow up the world.

Thus the setting of this strategy game, available in Early Access on Steam. Following a series of arcane wars, all that remains of the world of Driftland is shattered islands floating in an endless sky. As an all-powerful mage yourself, your job is to build a new kingdom, and hopefully not screw it all up this time.

You expand your domain by scouting the mists with your scrying powers, before dragging resource-rich islands you find towards you, and linking them to your existing lands with a series of rickety rope bridges.



Beyond that appealing twist, gameplay is reminiscent of classic fantasy kingdom sim Majesty. As in that game, here you don't directly control an army. Instead you recruit adventurers who roam your kingdom freely, fighting monsters, levelling up, and gathering loot. If you want something specific sorted, you need to set a quest, with a gold reward high enough to persuade your warriors to take it on.

Meanwhile, you're more directly in charge of placing buildings, choosing upgrades, and managing workers. With rival kingdoms making their own landgrabs, the resulting game is somewhere between RTS and a management sim.

The current build already feels feature-rich, and there's a joy to building up your kingdom. But as it stands it does feel a bit lacking in direction – without clear goals we're just expanding for the sake of it, and it's hard to feel that our choices are meaningful. We're hoping that's addressed in coming updates. ■ ***Robin Valentine***

Instant Reaction

+ Classic Majesty-style gameplay with a unique twist – and it's already looking good in Early Access.

– Future updates need to focus on structure. At the moment, games can feel a bit aimless and repetitive.

THRILL-O-METER

1 2 **3** 4 5

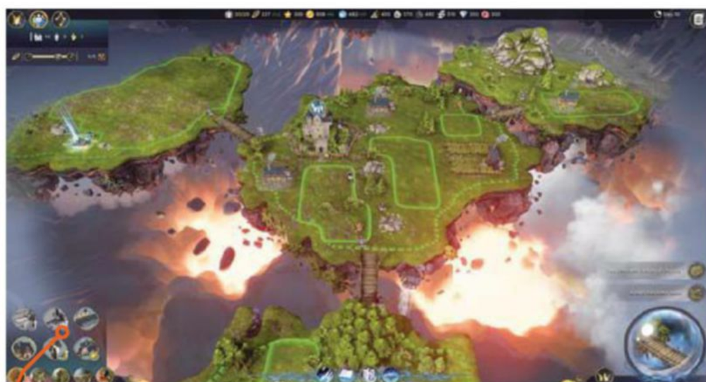
A strong start in Early Access, with plenty of good ideas to build on.











Islands are procedurally generated, so no two games are the same – each features its own selection of resources, treasure, and roving monsters.



You'll see your heroes wandering about, but no civilians or workers – buildings simply suck up nearby resources automatically. It can make kingdoms feel a bit empty.



He might look imposing but we're sure he does a mean mojito. Or more likely a flaming Sambuca.

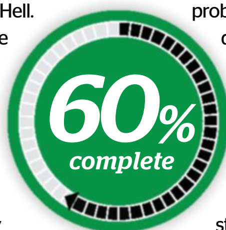
Format PC **Developer** Night School Studio
Publisher Night School Studio **ETA** Summer 2019

AFTERPARTY

There's going to be one hell of a hangover after this one

After giving us the truly special Oxenfree, developer Night School Studio has announced its next game, and it's looking no less interesting. Afterparty pits you in a drinking contest against the Devil himself. Sounds easy? Have you learned *nothing* from Cuphead?

The game follows Milo and Lola, who've been best mates pretty much their whole lives, as they find themselves quite dead and set to face an eternity in Hell. Lucky for them, though, there is one way to get out of this grim afterlife, or so they're told: by outdrinking the Devil. But to do so they'll need to find a way into his private afterparty. You play as both Milo and Lola as they go on one massive bender through the underworld, meeting all sorts of characters and getting into all kinds of trouble. The best part? The pair don't even know what they did to end up in Hell in the first place.



Devil's in the details

Now, this isn't entirely your flames-and-pitchfork sort of Hell. The developer has spoken about how it's making each area you visit unique, each drawing from different religions and beliefs about the afterlife. As in Oxenfree before it, player choice will also be at the forefront of this game, with the developer promising that how you spend time in the game's various areas will be entirely your decision. We're hoping for a similar real-time branching dialogue system to the one seen in Oxenfree – it worked brilliantly there. We also expect to do some clever problem solving along the way, probably involving copious amounts of alcohol. And, unlike in real life, in Hell using alcohol to solve your problems is a smart idea, with drinks giving you supernatural abilities that will ensure Milo and Lola are the life and soul of the party. Well, the soul, at least.

Given Night School Studio's knack for storytelling, creating characters, and devising some top-notch puzzles, there's every reason to suspect Afterparty will be one incredible follow-up to Oxenfree. Certainly, the novelty of the bar-hopping premise has our attention. There's been no announcement yet on a release date or platforms, and while PC seems a sure thing, we're not so sure about consoles. But based on everything released so far, this is one party you won't want to miss. ■ ***Sam Greer***

GM Instant Reaction

+ Its neon-drenched hell looks quite appealing, and the premise is fun and novel – we want to see how this story plays out.

– Anyone who's been on a stag/hen do knows it's hard to keep the pace up over a pub crawl. Can Night School pull it off?

THRILL-O-METER



Strange, colourful and humorous. Should be something special.





It might be Hell, but it looks like a great place for a night out. And you'll probably encounter fewer goblins here than we do in our local.



Format PS4, XO, PC Pub Bandai Namco
Dev Bandai Namco ETA Summer

CODE VEIN

Fang-tastic

Now that From Software has moved on to non-Dark Souls pastures, Bandai Namco is looking to fill the hole left in its library. Enter Code Vein, a vampire-themed, post-apocalyptic, anime-style action-RPG with many of the Dark Souls/Bloodborne trappings: slow, deliberate, and methodical hacking and slashing; punishing enemies and bosses; maybe some exquisite environmental storytelling?

It certainly looks very different from any of From's games, for better or worse, and the companion system certainly is novel. Littered throughout the game are various characters you can pick to accompany you on your adventure. They all have different weapons and abilities so you'll need to choose wisely.

There's also a robust character creator so you can make your own anime goth boy or girl. Expect to be donning lots and lots of black leather. ■ *SG*

GM Instant Reaction
THRILL-O-METER 1 2 3 4 5
A bloody RPG with potential.



Wadjet Eye has a real talent for old school adventure game visuals.



Format PC Pub Wadjet Eye Games Dev Wadjet Eye Games ETA Spring

UNAVOWED

Occult classic

You were possessed by a demon but saved by a secret organization who freed you. But while you were possessed you left a trail of blood through New York City. Oops?

Thankfully you've a chance to undo all the horrible things by joining a secret organisation, the Unavowed, and helping to solve a load of supernatural trouble. This point-and-click game comes from the maker of Gemini Rue, Resonance, and Shardlight. Like those, there's plenty of detailed backgrounds and characters that recall the style of '90s adventure games, though this has twice the resolution of the dev's usual games. The grimy, slightly unsettling world is quite compelling and we can't wait to see what unfolds. There are plenty of strange things on display: druids, wizards, giant snake men – all the good stuff, you know? Hey, when it comes to magic, the weirder the better.

You'll be able to choose a male or female protagonist before getting stuck into this supernatural vision of New York, weaving through a branching storyline. You can also play through three different origin stories for your character. (Well, it worked for Dragon Age!) There are four companions to choose from on your adventure, each possessing their own unique abilities. Unlike Wadjet Eye's earlier games, Unavowed will have full voice acting to help bring the world and its cast to life. The company's last games proved to be charming and absorbing – expect similarly good things from Unavowed. ■ *Sam Greer*

GM Instant Reaction
THRILL-O-METER 1 2 3 4 5
A handsome point-and-click adventure.



Format PS4, XO, PC Pub Starbreeze
Dev Overkill Studios ETA Autumn

OVERKILL'S THE WALKING DEAD

Long in the making – it was originally announced back in 2014 – this anticipated adaptation from the developer of the Payday series is seeing the light of day later this year. It's a co-op first-person shooter set in Washington DC, combining elements of roleplaying and stealth as well as survival horror. Starbreeze Studios has revealed one of the main playable characters, Aidan, a man seemingly bored of modern life and embracing the apocalypse with a smile. Each playable character will have their own talents for you to use. ■ *SG*



Format PS4, XO, PC Pub Techland
Dev Techland ETA Summer

GOD'S TRIGGER

A top-down shooter with melee action, this plays out like a co-op version of Hotline Miami: fast paced, tactical, and absolutely packed with bloody violence. Actually, scrub the 'fast-paced'; this is lightning-paced. The speed of combat is such that a blink might cost you your life.

The co-op is really going to give God's Trigger its edge over the competition, as you and a mate should enjoy ploughing through enemies, and an extra shooter should help with the game's punishing speed and difficulty. It's not quite as stylish as Hotline Miami, but at that speed we won't be looking at the scenery. ■ *SG*



Format PC Pub MGM
Dev Eko ETA Summer

WARGAMES

This FMV adventure is a follow-up (though not a sequel) to the excellent Her Story, and, weirdly, it's a reimagining of the 1983 cold war thriller of the same name. Yeah, that one with Matthew Broderick. But don't go away! This is far more than just some naff movie tie-in. While the essence of the film's story will be brought to this game, the characters and details will be very different, embracing the shifts in technology since the original film. You play as a hacker named Kelly, steering the story through choices at key points, all played in a mix of FMV and in-game content. ■ *SG*



Format PS4, XO, PC Pub Koei Tecmo
Dev Omega Force ETA March

ATTACK ON TITAN 2

The second game in a series of adaptations of the hit Attack On Titan manga and anime. Like the comics and show, the game revolves around the slaying of monstrous titans, towering humanoids who attack the last remaining human settlement to kill and eat its soft and juicy human populace. You take the role of various characters from the story, using Vertical Manoeuvring Equipment to get airborne and zip around over rooftops like Spider-man. The last game was surprisingly solid, so this should be a treat for fans. ■ *SG*

Ico System

The magic touch of the team that brought us Shadow Of The Colossus

It's been 17 years since the release of Team Ico's first game and there is still something extra special about the world it's created. Ico, Shadow Of The Colossus, and The Last Guardian are each complete stories in their own right, but they share their setting, a world as recognisable as Bioshock's underwater colony of Rapture or The Legend Of Zelda's Hyrule.

Huge, imposing, but crumbling ruins. Wildernesses left untouched for eons. Creatures made of fur and stone. These are the trademarks of these loosely connected games and their unnamed world, an ancient place where magic lurks in the shadows. Every return to these games evokes those same feelings: isolation, wonderment, awe. It's feelings like that which we expect to be rekindled for a whole new audience when the Shadow Of The Colossus remake releases on 7 February. As the remake will no doubt prove, a big part of what allows these games to evoke those emotions is their atmospheric visuals.

Ico, the studio's first title, seemed to come from nowhere at the time. A puzzle platformer that emphasized co-operation with an NPC, it's still quite the novelty. It had started life in development for the original PlayStation, but as Team Ico's ambition bumped up against hardware constraints it moved to the PS2, which allowed it to stay true to creator Fumito Ueda's complete vision.

Simple pleasures

The game tells the story of a boy sent to rescue a mysterious young woman from an evil castle. It's hardly the most novel premise, but the way this tale is brought to life is what makes it such a classic, and the visuals of that story really helped cement that status. The crumbling fortress where the game's set is awe-inspiringly vast in scope, but in the details it's relatively mundane. There are no magical portals or outlandish monsters. There are just bricks covered in moss, rusted iron chains, and the odd windmill. Even the shadows which are the Boy's main foe are very simple in their design.

The approach the team took to achieve this was "subtractive design", in which any visual elements that seemed unrealistic or detracted from other realistic elements were removed. The end result is Ico's world feels fantastical because of its scale but believable because of how it looks up close. Being able to see it as a real place makes those special moments feel genuinely magical because they come from a place we believe in.

Shadow Of The Colossus, released in 2006, took the world of Ico from narrow corridors to vast open plains and deserts. It tells the tale of Wander, a young man on a quest with his trusty horse, Agro, to resurrect a – you guessed it – mysterious young woman. To accomplish this he must slay the 16 Colossi of a secluded realm called the Forbidden Lands, connected with the outside world only via one long, impossibly thin bridge.

Ruins dot the landscape, a space that's still impressively huge and mercifully unspoiled by the usual clutter of side activities that plague so many modern open-world titles. Rolling plains, deep deserts, secluded forests, and caves shrouded in fog all surround the game's central towering shrine. Like Ico's setting, it's full of details, and in the world there's very little in the way of outlandish elements. The landscape is huge, but it's mundane. The trees here are like trees anywhere, and

"EVERY RETURN TO THESE GAMES EVOKES THOSE SAME FEELINGS: ISOLATION, WONDERMENT, AWE"

The stone and fur of the original Colossi felt almost tactile – and they're even more realistic now.

The many influences on Team Ico

Though the end result is distinctly unique, there are nonetheless numerous influences recognisable in the work of Team Ico. The most obvious, especially in Shadow Of The Colossus and The Last Guardian, is pre-Columbian architecture, particularly Mayan and Incan design. Team Ico has taken the style and made something new with it, but it helps both tie these games to the real world and give them a unique, ancient feel.

It's not just the real world that has served as an influence. Numerous artists have been cited as shaping the feel of Team Ico's world, but no influence is quite as striking as the work of Gérard Trignac. His fantastical works, portrayals of grandiose structures that are dizzyingly tall and complex, seem a clear foundation for the design of Ico's fortress and especially The Last Guardian's series of towers.

Trico won't always do what you want. Like a real creature, he can be stubborn or make errors.

Towering, empty ruins feature in all Team Ico games, giving the sense the stories take place in one world.

After

Before

Reborn again

There's a timeless quality to the art direction of Team Ico's games, exemplified by the upcoming Shadow Of The Colossus remake. Not because it so flawlessly brings the Forbidden Lands over a decade forward in graphics, but because most of what makes it so striking is present in the original. The remake's overhaul feels more like a loving spit and polish than an absolutely vital makeover. It's why, despite being made many years apart (about a decade in the case of Shadow Of The Colossus and The Last Guardian), all of the studio's games feel connected, part of that shared setting. Many other games lose their identity as technology marches on. The latest Halo games retain some of the motifs from the originals, but the overall look and feel is virtually unrecognisable. That's not the case with the Ico series, which has stuck to an exceedingly well-considered set of principles.

the ruins that you find are crumbling and moss-strewn like any in the real world. Its opponents, its *only* opponents, are the humongous Colossi, which you have to climb to discover their weak points. They are truly fantastical creatures, and yet they feel fully alive, despite their clear impossibility. They're given a tactile feel that makes them feel part of the very landscape, and as a result, they wind up as believable as the Forbidden Lands themselves.

Trico treat

The Last Guardian was released in 2016 after a troubled nine-year development. It's the third title in the developer's library, and feels like a blend of Ico's puzzle focus with Shadow Of The Colossus' huge beasties. In it, a young boy is trapped in a maze of towering ruins called The Valley. This place is dizzyingly vertical and impressively interconnected, the game taking place in one huge labyrinth that takes us from hanging gardens to mines and temple-like spaces. With the hardware of PS4 The Last Guardian is able to bring the style of Ico and Shadow Of The Colossus to life in greater detail. The main principles are there, seen in the Mayan-esque structures and stark contrasts of light and dark, but this is vastly more lifelike than what went before.

The young boy's only companion is, shockingly, not a mysterious young woman but a huge griffin-like beast



called Trico. Together the odd pair must take advantage of their difference in size to overcome various obstacles. Like the Colossi before him, Trico is rendered with grit, his feathers created as perfectly as the giants' fur, and the whole environment reacting to his weight. This pursuit of realism in such fantastic situations is what gives these games that special something. It's the kind of quality that helps them stand apart from so many other, more stylised games. Compared to the fantasy worlds of Dragon Age or Final Fantasy, the setting of Team Ico's games seems almost entirely real.

Necessity breeds innovation, and carrying out each title's bold vision demanded advancements in technology that still impress. The light and shadow of all three titles, the burning bloom of the sun's glow on objects, was cutting-edge at the time of PS2. Ico's animations were very influential too, its use of key frame animations paving the way for many subsequent games. Moreover, that was something that would improve significantly with the next two games. The fur of the Colossi was several years ahead of its time, and only in very recent years have there been games with

"CARRYING OUT EACH TITLE'S BOLD VISION DEMANDED ADVANCEMENTS IN TECHNOLOGY THAT STILL IMPRESS"

Trico's physicality is based on the movements and behaviours of a whole range of different animals.


Ico was the team's first game, and established the series' art style.

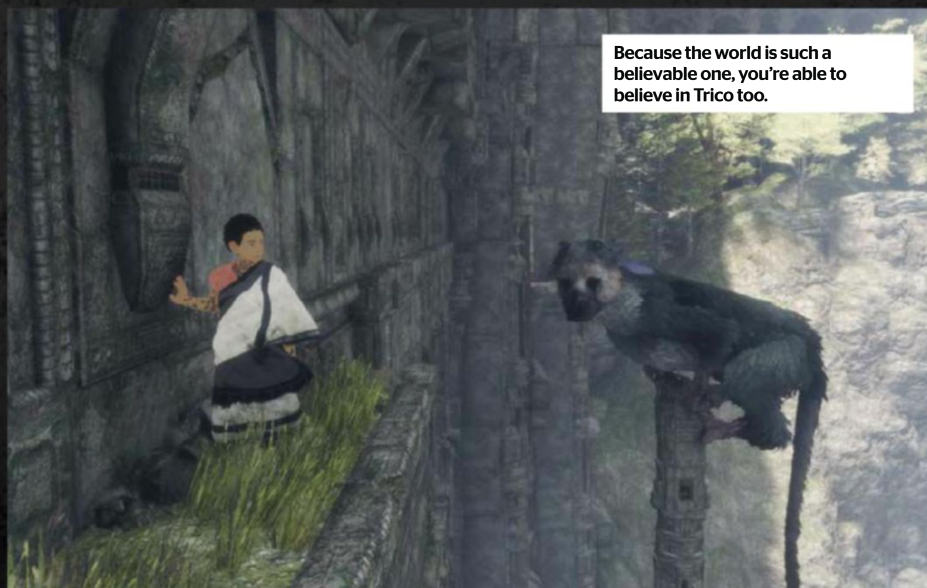




comparable detail. And Agro's animations, the way she shifts weight on uneven terrain and reacts to Wander's presence in the saddle, makes her to this day the most credible horse brought to life in videogames. As for Trico's life-like animation, it is really a cut above anything that exists in the medium. Players get genuinely attached to him because he seems so real.

In Arcadia Ico

The games show a devotion to craft that surpasses so many of their peers. It has come with its costs – plenty of gamers will criticise the sometimes-imprecise controls – but it's still so inspiring to see games which strive to be interesting and not just a more polished version of something we've seen dozens of times already. Moreover, they want to create a world that in spite of all its fantastic elements, you can believe in. That's why they stick with us, because they feel like an extension of our own reality instead of an alternative. It makes them a reflection that lingers with us. With the SOTC remake, it could be time for a whole new audience to lose itself in Team Ico's special world. ■ ***Sam Greer***


Because the world is such a believable one, you're able to believe in Trico too.



Imagine a world cut off for 200 years. Then imagine its last cultural touchpoint is the 1970s...



Who is...



SLOW BROS.

Made up of a small team of best friends, Onat Hekimoglu, Ole Tillmann, Fabian Preuschoff, and Daniel Beckman, Slow Bros was founded only two years ago in Cologne in Germany. Harold Halibut is the tiny studio's first project but the group is dedicated to bringing together digital and analogue media to create unique gaming experiences. Looking good so far...

Format PS4, XO, PC **Developer** Slow Bros **ETA** Late 2018 **Web** http://bit.ly/gmharoldhalibut

#1 HAROLD HALIBUT

Going through the stop motions



When you think about it, most games are handmade. Whether it's the gun you stuck with through thick and thin, or the hat you immediately switched out for a better one, someone *somewhere* poured their life into its creation. (Yes, you *should* feel guilty about the hat.) Harold Halibut takes this to another level. The underwater world of this titular janitor has been entirely crafted in the real world. Think Wallace And Gromit and you're on the right track.

"The reason why we started with the stop-motion style is actually a funny story," enthuses designer and writer Onat Hekimoglu. "It was our love of stop-motion films, of course, but also the fact that at the time we started we were a team of three people and none of us could draw or 3D model anything, so it was our only option for asset production. We soon realised that we needed a proper artist, so Ole Tillmann joined the team. We spent time experimenting with various approaches, starting with real sprite-based stop-motion animation, until we decided to go with the 3D scanning approach, since the first sprite-based prototypes of the game felt very static and '90s. We wanted to have the best of both worlds, keeping an analogue handmade feel while being able to use dynamic lighting and shadows and so on."

Plasticine it

From the clothes the characters wear, to wire-framed puppets, and detailed backgrounds, everything in Harold Halibut is painstakingly created. "After building all the assets in the real world we 3D scan them using photogrammetry. That means we put every single thing in the game on a turntable and photograph it from every angle to then feed it back into the photogrammetry software, which generates a high-poly model out of the images," explains Hekimoglu.

"We then use different retopology techniques to get low-poly models we can use in the real-time game environment. This makes it possible to create digital replicas that are very close to the originals with all the benefits 3D models (especially in real-time

> "WE WANTED TO KEEP A HANDMADE FEEL WHILE BEING ABLE TO USE DYNAMIC LIGHTING AND SO ON"



Yes, Wes Anderson is a direct influence on Harold Halibut, but that's definitely no bad thing. We'd play the hell out of Fantastic Mr Fox: The Game



This isn't just a pretty stop-motion face; there's real depth beneath the hand-crafted surface. "It's Harold's personal story that we are focusing on," says Hekimoglu. "A story about friendship and relationships in general."



Every background in the game was hand-crafted before being digitised so it could become part of the game world. Yes, this scene physically existed.





environments) have, like more precise control, fluid animation, physics, and being receptive for dynamic lighting."

So, lesson in photogrammetry over, what's Harold Halibut about? Despite the name, we're not going fishing – but there *is* water involved. "Hundreds of years ago, in the 1970s, the Generation Ship was sent out as humanity's last chance to continue life elsewhere, but poor planning led to the mission crash-landing on a planet that turned out to be water-only," explains Hekimoglu. "So Harold never witnessed the heroic spirit the people on board once carried with them, as he was born way past the crash date. You will notice a limboish state inside of 'Fedora I'. Technically the plan is to find a way to relaunch the ship and get out of the water but the diversity among the inhabitants leads to various interest groups standing in each other's way."

This is an adventure game at heart. As Harold we must explore Fedora 1. There aren't just people to meet, either. Strange devices lurk everywhere, combining modern technology with not-so-modern designs. "Although it's kind of a dystopian setting, we have a comedic approach to storytelling," says Hekimoglu. "The fact that we kind of have an alternative timeline from the '70s gives us the ability to mix sci-fi things that don't exist in our real world yet with things which the inhabitants of the Fedora found a slightly different approach to. For example there is no copy-and-paste, so there's a person who has to write every single spam mail he sends out to the inhabitants… you can imagine that it's a full-time job."

> **LIKE THIS? TRY THIS!**
>
> **Try this!**
>
> **Little Nightmares might not be stop motion but there's a sense of the surreal in Six's adventures that we can't help but feel is similar to Harold's hand-crafted world.**
> **bit.ly/gmlittlenightmares**

Wes man

And yes, Wes Anderson is clearly an influence but he's not the only person who has inspired the team. "Being an interdisciplinary team from different fields of expertise (we even have a fashion designer in our team) our influences come from different places" explains Hekimoglu. "From the adventures we played as children to modern adventures like the Telltale games, or the wonderful Night In The Woods, conceptual architecture firms like Archigram, and a lot of films – stop-motion Wes Anderson and the Pixar films, which we especially adore because of their approach of creating something that is enjoyable both for children and adults."

Even from the brief moments we've seen Harold in action it's clear he's got a vivid imagination. While we assume he's cleaning up a messy crime scene from his narration in one scene, it turns out only to be red paint splattered across the floor. "Harold spends most of his time in his mind," confirms Hekimoglu. "After all, there isn't much to do if your life is limited to a spaceship trapped under the sea… Through his spirit-guide/employer and more so by accident than intent he may become responsible for finally stirring up the stale soup people call society." We can't wait to dive in. ■



The 60 Second Pitch

Moulding the clay with **Onat Hekimoglu**

"Harold Halibut is a modern adventure game, with a strong focus on storytelling and exploration. Wander around an underwater community that has formed after 200 years of enclosed space travel, somehow stuck between its launch date on Earth of the 1970s and the witnessing of foreign planets and its inhabitants. Get a feel for the unusual circumstances by talking to others on board and fulfil your duties as a lab assistant and janitor. Take in the atmosphere and be a part of this utopia-turned-awry. Enable communication within a society that has long been fixated on (and eventually disillusioned with) being the last outpost of humanity. Your choice of engagement in conversation unfolds and affects Harold's personality. Be prepared to make all the stuff around you bleep and bloop. Do be careful, though. If you break the wrong thing someone might hold a grudge against you. Enjoy the comedy and stop-motion feeling in this world made entirely out of craft materials like clay, wood, and metal."

Format PS4, PS Vita, PC **Dev** Spooky Squid Games **ETA** 2018 **Web** http://bit.ly/gmrussiansubwaydogs

#2 RUSSIAN SUBWAY DOGS

Bark: survival evolved

If the most exciting thing that happens on your commute is when you change the flavour of syrup in your morning latte, join the club. The daily bus or train journey doesn't have much going for it. One thing that would change *everything* would be if there were all kinds of shapes and sizes of dogs on there with you. It turns out that if you're travelling to work in Moscow, you're as likely to have a canine companion as that same guy in a suit who always picks his nose.

"I read about the real-life dogs first in a news article back in 2012 when I made a prototype version of Russian Subway Dogs for a game jam," explains game designer and Spooky Squid co-founder, Miguel Sternberg. "Scientists in Moscow had discovered that some stray dogs had learned to commute using the subway system. These dogs knew the train routes and stops. They'd travel to and from the suburbs, where it's safer to sleep, to stations with good sources of food in the downtown core. They also learned a variety of strategies for stealing, scavenging and begging for food. These included barking behind people so they'd drop their food in surprise, which became a core mechanic in the game."

Press pawse

Where things veer from reality is that you're going to be collecting food with a surprising array of effects. Oh, and there's exploding vodka. Because Russia. "We have around a dozen food types, each requiring a slightly different strategy



Each Moscow metro station has its own unique soundtrack as well as, in some cases, animal-themed architecture.

to acquire," confirms Sternberg. "A few, like the highly valuable bear ribs, require multiple steps and the liberal application of explosive vodka. A handful of these foods can also grant special abilities: hot sauce will let you bark fireballs, coffee slows time etc. The twist is that these foods can also give rival wildlife special powers if they eat them before you. Mess up and you can end up facing super-speed poodles, or a subway elk charging at you with fiery antlers!"

Complete with a soundtrack from Guacamelee composer Peter Chapman, the side-scroller recreates the iconic locales of the Moscow metro system in bright, pixelated form. Background artist Alina Sechkin has been doing her research. Sternberg explains, "The metro system is spectacular, with a huge diversity of architectural styles represented. One station might look like an old cathedral, while the next is a modernist Mondrian painting expressed in glass and steel… Of course, we have taken some liberties with the art inside the stations, replacing a lot of murals of Lenin and Stalin with cat- and dog-themed versions." It's a good game, Brent. ■



Bark and you'll scare commuters into dropping their food or vodka. Eat the former; watch the latter go kaboom.

Small… But Perfectly Formed

The five best indies not to miss on Nintendo Switch



#1 BATTLE CHEF BRIGADE

Imagine a magnificent cheese dream where you mix your fave shows from the Food Network with anime-style art and a side-scrolling combo-driven brawler. Add a sprinkling of Candy Crush-style match three puzzling as a garnish and you've got this cooking sim.



#2 THE FLAME IN THE FLOOD

This unusual post-apocalyptic survival roguelike pits you against the backwaters of America. A Kickstarter success from ex-Bioshock devs, it's a tense but lovely journey into the wild. Believe us when we say you're going to want to keep your dog friend safe.



#3 STARDEW VALLEY

Some people might wonder why you need the other games on this list when you could just load up this farming sim and never play anything ever again, but it's best to have the choice. Water crops, build a coop, and make mayonnaise to your heart's content. We might even still be here when you get back.



#4 OXENFREE

A beautiful supernatural thriller with more teenspeak than your average episode of Buffy, this is a perfect game to finish in one lovely chunk. You'll be heading back to the mysterious island to see how your friendship choices could have played out anyway. A perfect addition for a change of pace on Switch.



#5 LOVERS IN A DANGEROUS SPACETIME

By the time it's over, it might be more like haters in a dangerous spacetime, but there's fun to be found in co-piloting a ship with friends as you save bunnies across the galaxy. Plus, Switch means it's even easier to settle down anywhere for co-op fun. ■



Format PC **Dev** Pathea Games **ETA** 2018 **Web** http://bit.ly/gmmytimeatportia

#3 MY TIME AT PORTIA

Bring your Spirited Away game

If the words 'inspired by Animal Crossing' simultaneously delight and terrify you, prepare for this Kickstarter success to ruin your life and make it better all at once. The town of Portia is just waiting for you to start a new life and leave your old analogue one behind. Are there deserts, reefs, highlands, and mines in your real world? Of course not…

Creating the ultimate adventure with the right balance of exciting quests and a life sim where you can choose to just spend all day down on the farm meant the devs had to draw on a wide range of inspirations. "We looked at several games when designing My Time At Portia's gameplay, including Dark Cloud 2, Steambot Chronicles, and Harvest Moon," explains Zifei Wu, director of Pathea Games. "We wanted to make a game with action, lots of things to do, and a very lively NPC community, as well as a homestead. The workshop is set up in such a way that players will always want to "just one more day" it."

I'll be Ack

And if the style looks familiar, you've probably been watching a stack of Ghibli. "A lot of Miyazaki works sprang to mind when we first started to design the aesthetics and the world, especially Future Boy Conan and Nausicaä Of The Valley Of The Wind," says Wu. "We named the game My Time At Portia because we wanted the player to be able to look back on the time playing the game as a good memory in a beautiful world."

Of course, that beautiful world also includes some charming NPCs for you to make BFFS with. The team has focussed on making a bunch of people you'll genuinely like spending time with. "For me, the most fun character is Ack," says Yu. "Ack is a robot that literally falls out of the sky. He's very, very old, and has suffered from some hard drive damage. But he's always a friendly chap who loves to cook (technically, he's programmed to do so)." By 'ack, we're excited…



There's an in-depth history of the world to uncover,. when you're not socialising. A lot of effort has been put into creating a believable history.



Format PC **Developer** Terrifying Jellyfish **ETA** April **Web** http://bit.ly/gmnourgame

#4 NOUR

Play with your food

There aren't many games that make us hungry. You'd think Overcooked would have a chance but we always get too distracted furiously shouting about onions or tomatoes and screaming about dirty dishes. This means there's definitely a gap in the market for something to tempt those tastebuds. Kickstarter success Nour does just that. It's time to grab some digital noodles and settle down with a delicious interactive ramen simulator. Yes, *really*.

Ramen at work

Lone developer TJ Hughes was inspired by the intriguing shapes, colours, and textures of bubble tea and started 3D modelling glasses of the tapioca-filled drink. It was when he moved onto modelling ramen, though, that he managed to make all of his friends ravenous. After that he dived into creating interactive food art.

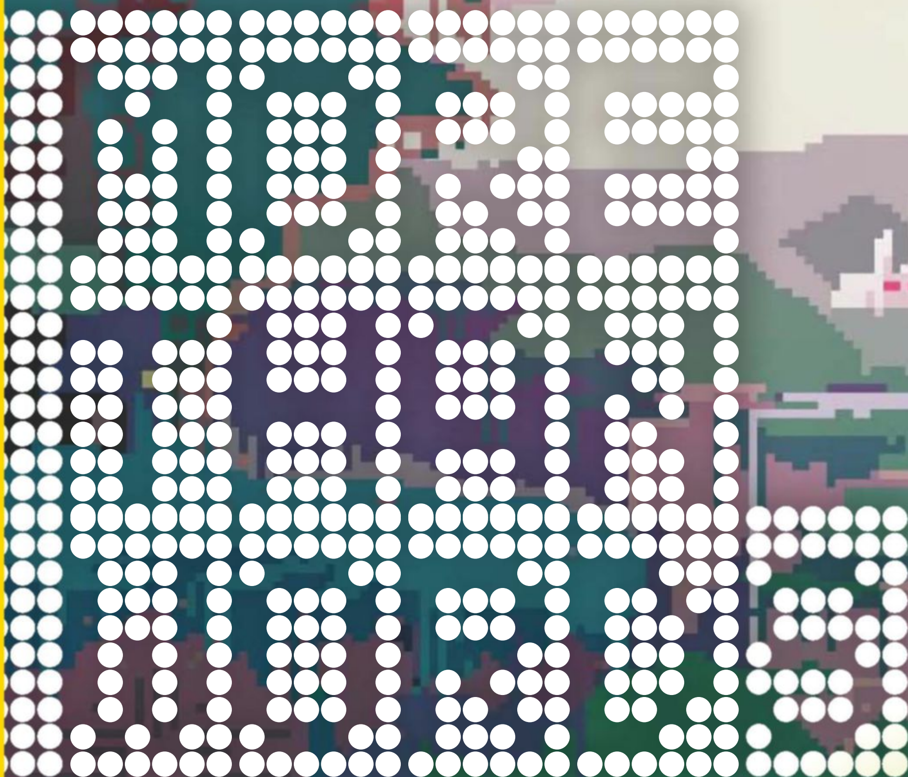
There's no need to worry about cooking skill here. Hughes has already done the hard graft in the kitchen and all you have to do is hammer the buttons on your keyboard and see what happens. Noodles fly in every direction and perfectly cooked eggs pour from the sky in this satisfying sandbox. There are no objectives beyond being creative and having fun with ramen.

And it doesn't stop at noodles. Popcorn needs popping, toast needs, well, *toasting* and mochi ice cream balls need to have sprinkles rained down on them from a tiny squee-inducing shower. There's even Midi Fighter 3D support if you fancy some ultra-tactile food interaction with your favourite controller. We can't wait to eat up later this year.

> "NOODLES FLY IN EVERY DIRECTION AND EGGS POUR FROM THE SKY"



Next on Hughes' list to be added to his culinary playground are hipster favourite avocado toast, doughnuts and, of course, boneless pizza.



The secret of telling a heartfelt story... with silence

Stop us if you've heard this one before. A lone wanderer awakes without any sense of place, thrust into a ruinous setting somewhere in the great unknown. Their only choice is to explore in the hope of discovering a little more about the world around them, and in turn, to learn more about how they're destined to fit into it.

You'd be forgiven for thinking we're referring to kinetic action game Hyper Light Drifter, the enrapturing path of exploration Rime sets you on, or possibly last year's radar-slipping Hob. And we are – but we're also referring to a whole raft of other indie titles too. These three speechless darlings are stellar examples of today's underdog indie developers continuing to do what they've always done: breed creativity from limitation. Said creativity, in this instance, being the ability to weave meaningful and immersive stories entirely without text or talking. Silent but deadly? You bet!

Of course, this necessity to do a lot with very little is nothing new for the industry, but it's only in recent years, with the rise of the modern indie developer, that games have allowed creative storytellers to experiment in such a way. They've excelled at conveying emotion, feeling, and any narrative context through less conventional constructs than we'd typically see in the triple-A space. For Raúl Rubio, creative director of Rime, this is an approach simply not possible with any other medium. "What makes a great story in a game is that unlike the theatre, movies, or whatever, you are not the passenger," he says. "Instead, the player is necessary. Your objective is to grow the story around you."

Rime and reason

This unique ability to weave narrative around the player rather than have one forced upon them, is primarily what led Rubio's development team over at Tequila Works to make Rime an entirely wordless adventure. Recounting the story of a young boy washed up on the shore of a mysterious island, the game initially drew close comparisons with the likes of The Legend Of Zelda: The Wind Waker and Ico when it was first revealed at Gamescom 2013. Dig a little deeper, however, and you'll unearth a much simpler yet wildly evocative experience, one that actively tugs on the player's natural sense of curiosity as they continue to poke and prod at the many secrets held within its world.

Where most action-puzzle games feel the need to inundate players with disruptive cinematic cutscenes to keep them invested in the wider tale, Rime instead keeps things simple. "The story changed from adventure for the sake of adventure into one that explored innocence, and loss, and grief. Eventually it resembled a fable," reflects Rubio. "In the sense that a fable has a structure that everyone can understand. No matter how old you are, where you're from, a fable is a story so straightforward, yet it contains a message." This desire to maintain universal appeal is key to silent videogame stories' avoidance of overcomplexity, in the hope of guaranteeing some degree of emotional impact.

It helps that, as ambiguous as the narratives of games like Journey, Limbo, and Hob can be, the universal languages of interaction, exploration, and music are always on hand to prevent players from becoming too muddled. "The music helps a lot to convey mood and set an atmosphere and tone for things," Alex Preston, the creator of 16-bit action-RPG throwback Hyper Light Drifter tells us. "And the visual stuff, whether that's a character animation or a setpiece that happens in the

"THE UNIVERSAL LANGUAGES OF INTERACTION, EXPLORATION, AND MUSIC ARE ON HAND TO PREVENT PLAYERS FROM BECOMING MUDDLED"

Ravaged landscapes convey the troubled past of Hyper Light Drifter's technologically twisted world.

JOURNEY

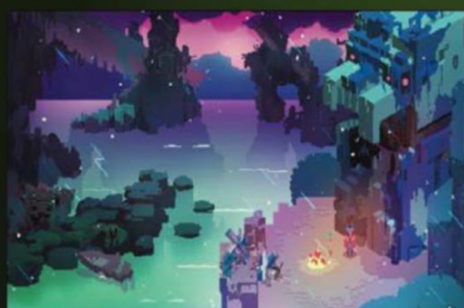
The undeniable godfather of silent storytelling in games, few people forget the first time they stepped out into the swirly sand dunes of Thatgamecompany's Journey. The game's purity is what elevates its fairly simple 'get to the mountain' objective above all the others that have attempted to replicate the experience since. Journey's free of scores to chase, collectibles to hunt, or UI to wrestle with. As an unnamed traveller, you and another forge your own path on an expedition that isn't coy about its inherent ambiguity. Rousing, beautiful, and, melancholic, it is a wordless story that elevates the medium.

VIRGINIA

We didn't know we needed a Twin Peaks-esque walking simulator until Virginia released in 2016. But the moment credits started to roll, we were glad to have engaged in this totally tight-lipped first-person mystery. Played out from the perspective of newly-recruited special agent Anne Tarver, Virginia's two-hour detective tale works well within the framework of its silent yet cinematic presentation – a sentiment brilliantly realised through a swelling musical score and movie-like harsh cuts that smartly shuffle you from scene to scene. There might not be any dialogue, but Virginia's more artistic approach to narrative manages to speak volumes.







world. Or just the colour and detail in a level, that stuff matters if you want to draw the player's eye over to a specific element in the game when we're trying to convey something specific."

Getting across what is going on, what isn't, and what might be possible within a silent narrative proves a tricky balancing act. The story behind Hyper Light Drifter, for example, is that an ancient race came and caused much devastation long before the drifter's eventual arrival – and that's not the easiest thing to pass on without dialogue. "With our world in particular, there's a lot of stuff going on that we didn't want to make super-explicit." An intentional choice long before the game launched on Kickstarter, Preston suggests there's method in his madness. "I think when you're doing storytelling period, you want to give the audience enough information to draw them in and keep them interested but you don't want to push them too far so that it becomes boring."

Trance-formative

Both Hyper Light Drifter and Rime's stories are classic cases of 'show, don't tell', requiring a great deal of faith between developer and player that reaching the end of the journey, however mysterious, everything will have been worthwhile. Success might be subjective, but one thing that's always certain is these stories will be construed in different ways by different players. Sometimes interpretations even surprise those who created them. "That's part of the fascination," muses Preston. "When I read other interpretations, or I see a video that explores in-depth why maybe 'this part of the world is this way'. To me, that's part of the joy in making a story that's a little more interpretive."

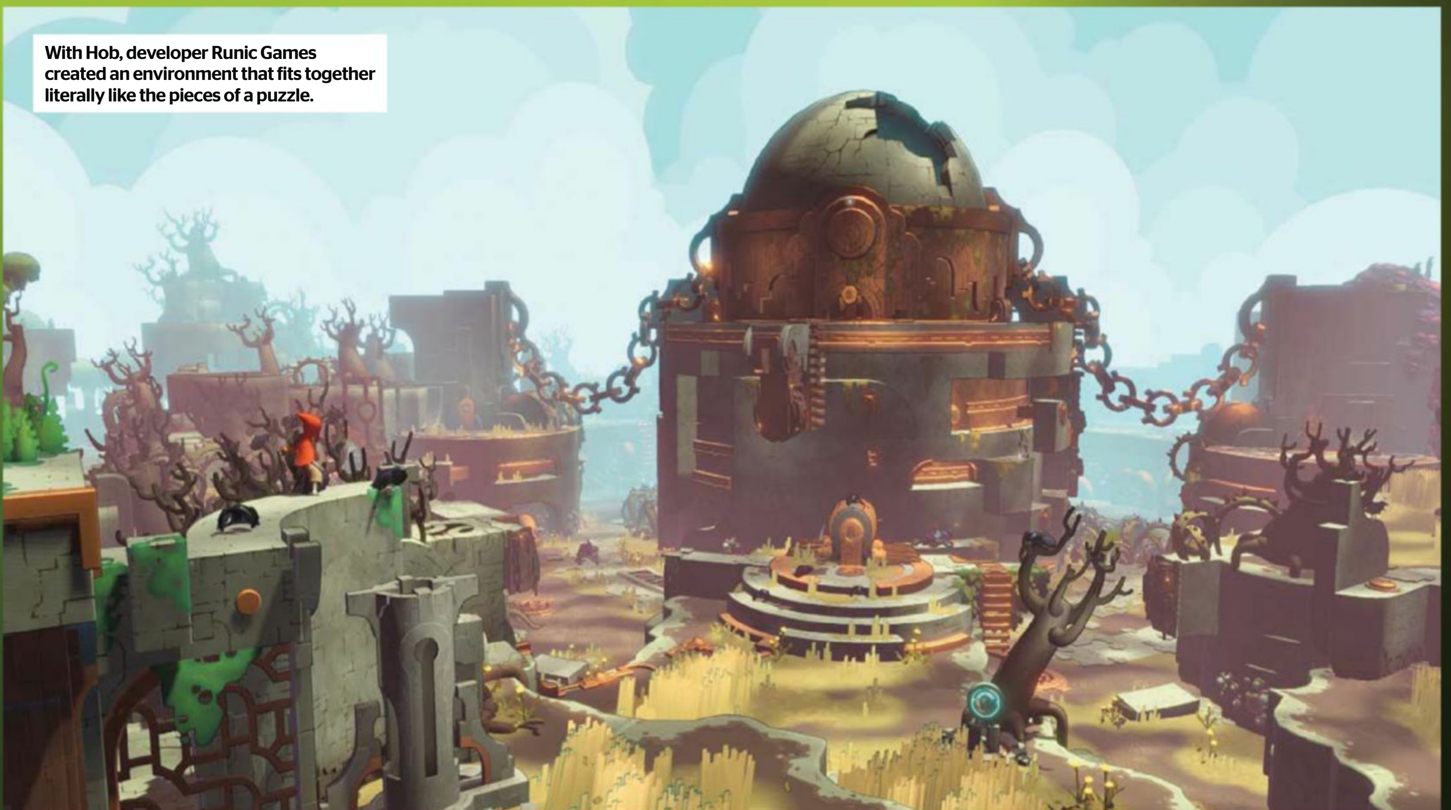
The same can be said for Rime which, following release, touched players to such a degree, many sent in their own reactions to its emotional conclusion. "We received over 300 letters from fans," reveals Rubio. "They told us personal experiences of loss, grief, and they told us what they thought the ending was. All of them were different. Some of them were sad and some of them were hopeful, and that actually surprised me a lot. For me, the ending is that 'every end is a new beginning'." Despite this being the meaning Rubio personally had in mind, he's quick to remind us that there is no wrong answer.

With the future of narrative-driven single-player games recently being called into question, it falls not only to indie developers to continue finding new and artistic ways to grip us, and encourage the genre to thrive. Like the wordless wanderers themselves who persevere in the hope of finding resolution, if players want it, such experiences will be there. Providing we make ourselves heard. ■ ***Aaron Potter***

"ONE THING THAT'S ALWAYS CERTAIN IS THESE STORIES WILL BE CONSTRUED IN DIFFERENT WAYS BY DIFFERENT PLAYERS"

LIMBO

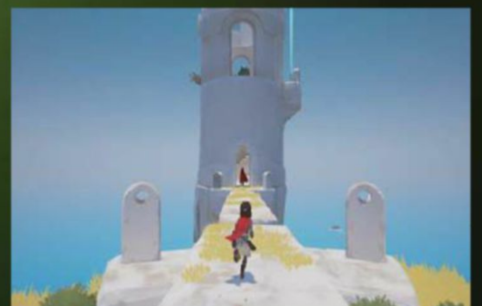
The debut puzzle-platformer from suitably secretive developer Playdead, Limbo astonished us when it was originally released on Xbox Live Arcade in 2010. The game has since spread to almost every conceivable platform, continuing to intrigue with its delightfully dark adventure, in part due to its perplexing conclusion. Limbo manages to unnerve not solely because of its lack of speech, but the setting too. Working your way through the monochromatic world as just a young boy, you know you need to escape. As to why, what for, or to what end? Perhaps the game's title is a clue...



With Hob, developer Runic Games created an environment that fits together literally like the pieces of a puzzle.







HOW WE SCORE

0-39 Awful Avoid it as you would a bullet with your name on.
40-59 Poor Major issues here that won't be solved with a hug.
60-69 Decent A mixed bag filled with sweets and sharp stones.
70-79 Good Some flaws, but still a very enjoyable experience.
80-89 Excellent Buy it, love it, thank us when you're done.
90-100 Outstanding A rare and essential piece of brilliance.

The small print: We rate games in comparison to what else is available on the same system, in the same genre, and for the same format at the time of release. So this year's FIFA might score less than a FIFA from three years ago, but still be a better game. Because time, and our expectations, move on. Hey, you're smart, you get it...



Not awarded based simply on score, but rather given to games that possess a special blend of qualities. For instant classics that you won't regret owning.

Format PC, XO **Publisher** PUBG Corporation, Microsoft **Developer** PUBG Corporation **ETA** Out now **Players** 100

PLAYERUNKNOWN'S BATTLEGROUNDS

Guns? Check. 100 players? Check. Terrible name? Check

Believe the hype. With some caveats. PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds – or PUBG, as you will have seen it referred to across the entirety of the internet since March 2017 – had already sold millions of copies on the PC before it had even seen its full release, while the Xbox One version bagged over a million sales in its first three days on sale. It's choppy, buggy, prone to some bizarre idiosyncrasies, and, quite frankly, not finished. And yet, PUBG still manages to be invigorating, fresh and one of the biggest adrenaline rushes we've encountered in all of gaming.

The setup is initially straightforward: up to 100 players are dropped from a plane on to one of two expansive maps. From there they procure weapons/armour/ items on the ground, and the last individual or team left alive wins. If it were just that, PUBG would still be a lot of fun, but it's all the extra flourishes that help it rise above, mixing in strategy, technique, timing, and derring-do in a number of different ways.

First and most obviously comes the safe zone. When you land, whether that be on the Russian-styled island of Erangel or the newer desert map of Miramar, a countdown commences and a white circle appears on the map. Once this timer expires, a blue wall of... well, *death*, encroaches on the map, with anyone left outside it having their health chipped away at until they die or make their way inside the safe zone. Once it's reduced, the process happens again with a smaller safe zone – and so on until either everyone (bar one) is dead or the zone is literally a couple of metres wide.

Death standing

The simplicity of the safe zone system is just glorious; it forces players to not only keep on the move, but to be aware of their surroundings and explore new areas as they go. There's no finding a favourite spot and sticking there every time – you may have a multi-kilometre jog ahead of you to get to safety. Add to this the fact that being outside the zone doesn't mean insta-death and you have something that can result in a) a last-gasp reprieve, or b) using this no-man's-land to your tactical advantage. After all, it kills you a lot slower than bullets do.



Another zoning element comes in the Red Zone, so capitalised because it's a massive, random, chunk of the map that gets bombed and is marked in – you guessed it – red on the map. Stay in these areas without the cover of a building and you may well end up with a bomb-induced headache – again, a fine way to keep players on their toes and moving.

But it's not all about being constantly on the run, and you can still find yourself favourite little hidey-holes across the maps in which to grab your initial gear and set up for whatever's to come. It's

> "WHEN IT'S YOU AND THREE FOLKS YOU KNOW, *THAT'S* WHEN YOU'RE SEEING PUBG AT ITS BEST"

How many actual chicken dinners were eaten while working on this review? 0 – it's a vegan household



If you're getting into combat this close, you'll need to be quick on the trigger, and accurate. One of these two players wasn't.

surprising how tense and strategic PUBG's initial parachute jump can get, with players able to choose exactly when they exit the cargo plane carrying every other combatant and direct their jump/float wherever they choose. Do you opt for a population centre, guaranteed to have items but riddled with opponents? Do you go for a smaller village? The wilderness? They're all valid choices for different reasons, and it's another way PUBG's simplistic systems blend to make something utterly engaging.

As mentioned, you're procuring your inventory on site, meaning you'll find guns, ammo, armour, boosting energy drinks, and more spawned around the map. Sometimes you'll land a good roll, jogging around as a one-person army, while other times you'll be left with a peashooter with no ammo and nary a combat helmet in sight. However, soon enough it becomes apparent this doesn't matter as much as you might think. Yes, a combat god with high-powered sniper rifle in a hidden area of the map has an advantage, but… well, just chalk that loss up to experience when he pops you with a headshot. And there's the other rub: it's relatively painless to die, lose, and start again. The rhythm sets in, the desire to play more takes over, and before you know it you've bagged yourself your first (winner winner) chicken dinner.

Stealth and safety

Not the best shot in the world? Not to worry. Yes, others have an advantage in firefights, but what about in professional hide-and-seeking? PUBG might not seem the place for it, but it's a perfectly valid approach to crouch and creep your way around the 8x8km play area, sticking to the shadows and long grass and keeping your nose out of trouble. If we could do a 'hands up who won a game without any kills' there'd be at least a few mitts raised in the room, we guarantee it.

"YOU SURVIVE FOR 25 MINUTES, BEFORE KILLING YOURSELF WITH A MOTORBIKE JUMP GONE AWRY"

All of these elements (and a few more we're getting to) together help what is a bland-looking title stand out. PUBG wouldn't win awards for its looks, aside from maybe 'dullest'. Give it just a few full matches, though, and you're sure to be hooked. Mix up your play style. Vary your landings. Experiment, experiment, experiment. And always keep moving, even if you do it very slowly (and quietly) indeed. You're not always going to win, you're not always going to go on a killing spree, you're not always even going to get a gun before expiring – but your heart will always be pounding; the excitement will always be palpable.

All this and we haven't even touched on PUBG's strongest draw. Let's get this cleared up right here: this is a game you should play in a group, preferably with three others, and preferably with three others you know. There's more than enough to recommend PUBG played solo, and the game caters easily for players who don't have the Steam friends to form their own marauding Mad Max-alikes. That's all good. That's all fun.

But when it's you and three folks you know, chatting nonsense on your headsets, going on mini road trips, laughing as someone shatters a window



I LIKE DRIVING IN MY CAR

It's definitely not a Jaguar

PUBG's maps are big enough that footpower alone isn't always enough to get about efficiently. Fortunately there are plenty of vehicles, land and sea, to get you where you need to go.

The question is: do you *need* to drive about? It makes things quicker, it takes the strain out of getting into the safe zone. But cars are big and noisy, they crash and get stuck. When that happens they're an obvious target. Like everything else in PUBG, deciding if you'll use a vehicle isn't as straightforward a choice as it seems – there's strategy involved. Choose wisely.





We mentioned managing to run ourselves over. We weren't joking – this is literally a second before impact.





PUBG's pre-game lobby is pure chaos – the kind of thing scare stories about videogames are written for.



STORY SIM 2018

PUBG isn't just about the shooty-bang genre

PUBG is of the battle royale genre, that isn't in doubt. But one element stands out and is worth talking about: the stories it creates. Situations, item drops, and safe zones are all randomised – there's no space to get comfortable from game to game, and there are many ways in which to succeed. Or die trying. Here's just one.

We've dropped into an abandoned farm – two of us, the Undynamic Duo, not venturing too close to bigger towns until we've got at least one weapon between us. Looting commences, a few firearms are sourced, and even a vehicle shows its face – and the drive is on. We make a few stops here and there, topping up items and finding attachments to make ourselves feel that bit deadlier. Soon enough, we've passed the tipping point – this is now officially a Dangerous Duo.

We set out on the hunt, trying to find opposition to establish dominance over; to show we are to be reckoned with. We spot another vehicle on the horizon. The chase begins. Jousting with shotguns, we dance the dance until both our enemies leave their now-smoking vehicle. Time for the kill. One of us jumps from our car to flank. Said member of Duo is promptly blown up by a grenade from their own partner, before that same partner ploughs the car into the opponent's vehicle, dying in the resulting explosion. We saw no chicken dinners that day. But we had fun!

without warning the rest of the squad or fires their (very loud) assault rifle at a bush that 'looked funny' – *that's* when you're seeing PUBG at its absolute best. Looting an abandoned town, then meeting in the middle to share the weaponised wealth before bundling into a camper van and (in an ill-advised move) going off-road, encountering another squad, your driver turning too hard and flipping the van, everyone dying soon after… it's a storyteller, a game you're as happy to participate in as you are to watch, and one you always want to tell others about.

Especially when you manage to survive for 25 minutes before running over and killing yourself with a motorbike jump gone awry. Not that anyone here at GamesMaster would ever do anything like that. Ahem.

Friends with benefits

Additionally, playing with an experienced team means you're likely to last longer in a standup fight than you might going solo. Obviously this doesn't apply to those of us who are actually good at online shooters, but there's always going to be the dead weight in a team – and it's to PUBG's credit that the drag effect of a poor player can be mitigated somewhat with clever team play. Everyone gets to have fun, basically.

There's been a backlash against PUBG since it came out of Steam's Early Access programme in December 2017. After around nine months of solid praise and a player base generally happy with what was put in front of it, it was a step too far to see the version 1.0 release suffer from many of the same bugs and issues it had been plagued with for a long time. And that's fair. It's always irritating to suffer through random crashes, even in v1.0, when a game's spent so long in Early Access. The bug that stops the mouse from turning your character still pops up from time to time, even in v1.0. Buildings sometimes don't spawn, or players are born as hellbeasts without clothes or heads, even in v1.0. PUBG is buggy, it has issues, and while it is being fixed, it's being fixed (and updated) slowly.



Your mileage may vary. Some players will be turned completely off by PUBG's issues, unable to forgive its shonkiness and poor optimisation. Again: that's totally fair. But we would argue you are missing out on one of the purest slices of multiplayer fun since the days we first hooked our PCs up together to play Doom; since we shot each other in the head in the blistering action of Unreal Tournament; since Modern Warfare first hit and changed online shooters forever.

PUBG can in no way claim to be the first of the battle royale games, and in coming years it would surprise us little if a pretender to the throne were to become the new standard for the genre. There's obvious room to grow into and we're already seeing things evolve via titles such as Fortnite and Paladins, so the future's bright. But that's then – and right now what we actually have in front of us is something that, despite its obvious flaws and faults, rises above the criticisms, and stands tall as one of the absolute best games going. ■

GM LOVES…

- Pure fun, with surprising depth to the shonky-looking package.
- Lasting to the final 10 is literal heart-pounding stuff.

GM HATES…

- Performance issues and bugs can – still – be game-breakers.
- Being sniped from halfway across the map never gets fun…

Better than…



H1Z1
Brendan 'PlayerUnknown' Greene acted as consultant on this one, and it shows. It's fun, but PUBG refines his formula brilliantly.

Worse than…



Minecraft
Home of the earliest battle royale modes, there's little better than Minecraft – though PUBG is the better example of the genre.

NEED TO KNOW



At time of writing, PUBG on XBox One is still in the 'Game Preview' program – the console's equivalent of Early Access – so expect even more bugs and problems in that version.

GM JUDGEMENT

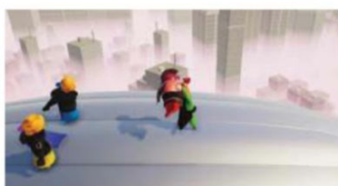
90%



Intense, rough around the edges, and brilliant. Don't fear its popularity: embrace it, and enjoy.
Ian Dransfield

GM Review
The Final Verdict!


We'd love to tell you what's going on here, but your guess is as good as ours.





Format PS4 **Publisher** Double Fine **Developer** Bone Loaf **ETA** Out now **Players** 1-8

GANG BEASTS

Fight-tastic beasts and where to pound them

Bone Loaf's long-gestating frantic wrestler isn't so much an agent of chaos but a commanding officer of it. A multiplayer brawler where you attempt to be the last person standing, matches seem simple but quickly devolve into a mess of headbutts and flailing limbs. The early hours we spend trying to grapple with its controls and systems provide hilarious moments of physical comedy and brutal finishes that are an absolute riot when you have a sofa full of friends to batter. But the longer your stay in the world of Beef City, the more its blend of fighting anarchy loses flavour.

Let's start where you should with Gang Beasts: its melee mode. A mix of sumo wrestling and ice skating thanks to the peculiar movement of characters, each fight encourages you to find a way to hurl your opponent to their doom while trying to keep yourself on stable ground. You'll need to soften up your mates first by knocking them out via some awkwardly swaying fisticuffs, and learning how to do so can be tricky thanks to nothing more than a control scheme buried in the menus and tips on the loading screen.

Once you start to get the hang of things, there's surprising breadth to the moveset. Along with throwing punches and headbutts, there are flying kicks and the ability to hoist unlucky bums above your head before chucking them out of the area you're scrapping in. Even the fighters' lurching gait has its nuances. There's little in the way of finesse, though, but in the early stages you'll howl with laughter thanks to each fight's unpredictability. Orchestrating Morph-esque models tussling like a WWE for drunken five-year-olds is worth rounding up a few friends for.

Where you fight also plays a huge part in the game's scruffy charm. There are 13 stages and each has its own special wrinkle. Naturally, some are better than others. Top of the class is a royal rumble in Ring, where you've got a tiny space to fight in, and flinging someone over the ropes is excellent fun. There's also the brilliant Subway, where you're on a rail platform and need to force your adversaries onto the tracks. Plus, a shout out to Ferris Wheel, where you each start in your own pod and have to find a way of getting to the others. With strong maps and an endearingly wonky fighting system, Gang Beasts seems to have 'cult hit' plastered across its head.

> "THERE'S LITTLE IN THE WAY OF FINESSE, BUT IN THE EARLY STAGES YOU'LL HOWL WITH LAUGHTER"

Beastly shame

Sadly, it doesn't quite earn that title. What holds this back from true multiplayer greatness is that the chaotic nature confuses rather than entertains the longer you play. It's hard to tell why some headbutts instantly knock one person out and will do nothing another time. Grabbing floored fighters is maddeningly inconsistent, with your fighter sometimes clutching the scenery or a flailing bit of costumery instead of the person at their toes. In fights the camera has a tendency to not zoom out enough if fighters go in different directions. They're all little niggles that linger just enough to take the shine off extended sessions.

That doesn't mean this shouldn't be nestled on your hard drive, though. There's too much fun to be had literally dragging mates down to your level. ■

The truest metric of Team GM's enjoyment of Gang Beasts? The number of times we got told to keep the noise down in the office...

GM LOVES...

- Fights are brilliantly chaotic and totally hilarious.
- Each stage offers different obstacles to overcome.

GM HATES...

- You need three other people to get the best experience.
- The lack of tutorials makes its hidden depths weirdly cryptic.

Better than...



Push Me, Pull You
Another bizarro wrestler that has you grappling with friends in weird ways, Gang Beasts is less likely to haunt your guests' dreams than this curio.

Worse than...



Towerfall: Ascension
When it comes to local play, this addictive mix of archery, pixel art, and deathmatches remains as exhilarating today as it was back in 2014.

2ND OPINION



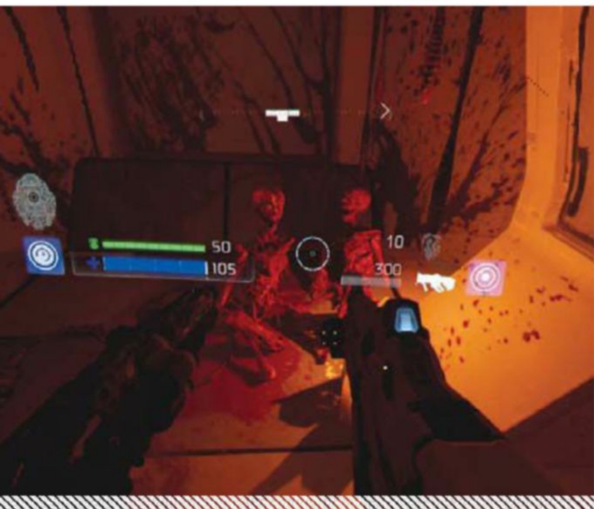
"How could I have known that the nuances of Gang Beasts' ragdoll combat would come so naturally to me? Having conquered the office, my fondness for it has been elevated. It's silly and great for moments of screaming or laughing at the screen, even if it feels a wee bit bare-bones."
Sam Greer, Staff Writer

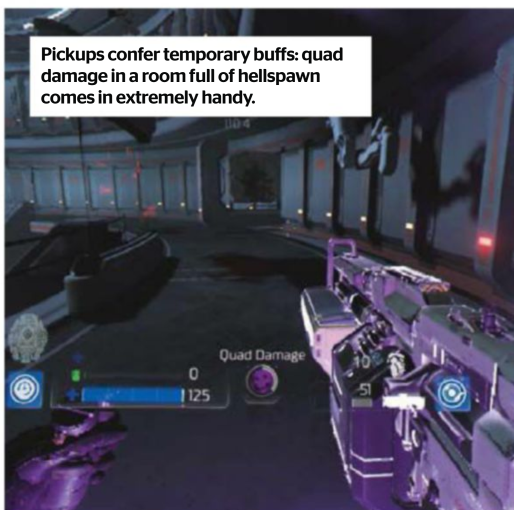
GM JUDGEMENT

78%

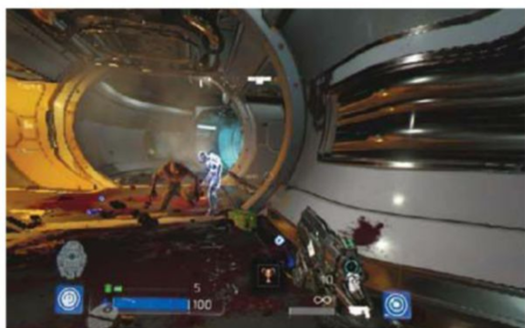


Not quite the classic it could have been, and the appeal wanes with time, but still a strong party starter.
Ben Tyrer





Pickups confer temporary buffs: quad damage in a room full of hellspawn comes in extremely handy.





ONLY ON VR PS VR, RIFT, VIVE

Format PS4 (reviewed), PC **Publisher** Bethesda Softworks **Developer** Id Software **ETA** Out now **Players** 1

DOOM VFR

Bethesda's experiment is messy in ways good and bad

Hats off to Id and Bethesda. Blithely ignoring the limitations of the tech, developer and publisher have invested time and money retooling one of the fastest shooters around for a format where movement – especially movement at speed – is a problem. Does Doom VFR miraculously fix that problem? Of course not. But it has a bloody good go. Emphasis on bloody.

It's a folly, then, albeit occasionally a glorious one. Technically, it's astounding, appearing somehow sharper than most VR games with no loss of smoothness. It looks like Doom, only this time you're in it, and that's an unequivocal win. On paper, the controls are smartly considered, too. A game as immediate as Doom – here be demons, go shoot them – shouldn't need a tutorial, but it feels necessary here. The intro contrives an excuse to show you the basics, as you pick up a combat chassis and quickly learn how to use it.

You can use regular analogue controls for movement, but unless you're keen to be reminded of what you had for breakfast, we'd recommend the default, which gives you the ability to teleport a short distance, with a short-range dash mapped to each D-pad direction. If you need to turn rather than strafe, you can do so in small increments with the right stick (we'd recommend reducing the step size slightly if you can handle it). While it's not perfect, getting around doesn't feel nearly as awkward as it could have.

Demon daze

And then the Cyberdemons, Mancubi, and Cacodemons arrive to hurt you, and while it doesn't fall apart entirely, what follows certainly feels like a messy compromise. Encounters are still fast-paced and intense, but disorientating as you jerk this way and that, attempting to dodge projectiles lobbed your way. The shooting isn't the issue, since looking to aim works well enough. But Doom was also a game about outmanoeuvring your opponents, whizzing smoothly around as if on rocket-powered skates. Here, it feels a bit like streaming video over wonky wi-fi, the action constantly stuttering and lurching. The frame rate is smooth; your movement not so much.

It just doesn't feel right, and it doesn't look quite right, either: the UI floats in front of your arms, positioned in such a way as to be distractingly noticeable yet hard to properly keep track of when all hell (quite literally) breaks loose. And if you're playing with a DualShock 4, it looks like your arms are attached to the sides of your neck. We'd still recommend it over PS Move controllers, mind, since you're given fewer turning options and some inputs are awkwardly mapped.

Pity, as there are some neat ideas here. Weakened enemies glow, prompting you to teleport *into* them for a grisly explosion: a smart approximation of the original's rip-and-tear mechanic. There are optional asides, figurines, and minigames to locate, and a clutch of simple puzzles to mix things up – not to mention a satisfying bit of business with a fire extinguisher. It's well-paced, too: for all its clunky moments, its brisk four-hour campaign never gets boring. It might be a valiant but ultimately misguided effort to fit a square peg into a round hole, but as long as you don't expect it to hit the heights of the main game, Doom VFR is PFG – Pretty *Flipping* Good. ■

"PLAY WITH A PAD AND IT LOOKS LIKE YOUR ARMS ARE ATTACHED TO THE SIDES OF YOUR NECK"

If a group of Mancubi wanted to protest against their working conditions, would they start a demon-stration?

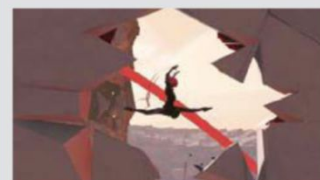
GM LOVES...

- ✓ The look of the original translates beautifully to VR.
- ✓ Teleporting into, and exploding, demons feels gruesomely great.

GM HATES...

- ✗ Combat is compromised by the awkwardness of 3D movement.
- ✗ Each of the control schemes feels like a fudge.

Better than...



Bound VR
This arty platformer has a bold and stylish look, but thanks to clunky platforming and a dull story it's a dog to play – particularly in virtual reality.

Worse than...



Farpoint
Sony's flagship VR shooter was built with the tech in mind, and makes the most of it; Doom VFR retools an existing game, and it shows.

NEED TO KNOW



Playing with the PS Aim controller introduces another problem. With both hands gripping the peripheral, you'll feel a weird disconnect when you see your avatar's grenade hand floating there.

GM JUDGEMENT

69%



Flawed but fascinatingly so, Doom VFR is a daring virtual remix that almost comes off.
Chris Schilling



If you're worried about getting bored of shooting Vex, don't worry! Our favourite giant rhino things, the Cabal, are present and correct too.

Format PS4, XO, PC (reviewed) **Publisher** Activision **Developer** Bungie **ETA** Out now **Players** MMO

DESTINY 2: CURSE OF OSIRIS

Ancient Egyptian laser beams

When Destiny 2 dropped on consoles back in September (and then on PC in October) it was very well received, and with good reason. Featuring incredibly fluid and satisfying gunplay, and a somewhat incomprehensible but visually spectacular story, it was a compelling experience indeed... for a while, anyway. Many players, some of us here at GamesMaster included, eventually drifted away from the game due to a pretty shallow endgame. For the lapsed among us, a new expansion has the potential to bring us back into that wonderfully addictive loot loop. So does this first DLC right the wrongs of the base game?

Curse Of Osiris adds a new planet, Mercury, for our intrepid Guardians to explore, as well as new story missions, strikes, PvP arenas, loot, and a Raid lair – a sort of remixed addition to the existing Leviathan Raid. Mercury consists of two notable areas: the Fields Of Glass and the Infinite Forest. The former serves as the planet's open-world section, and it's here you'll find public events, patrols, and adventures. The latter is a semi-procedurally generated area which is accessed via adventures and missions.

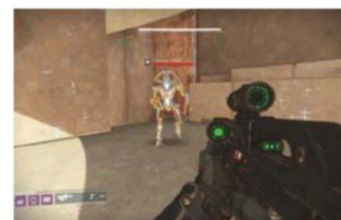
The Fields Of Glass is an incredibly small area, maybe a sixth (if that) of the size of the EDZ and half the size of Titan. It's also not that interesting – a drab circular desert area with a couple of landmarks. The skybox is as beautiful as ever, but if you survey the traversable land itself it's not much to crow about. There's only one public event here as well, which makes Mercury flashpoints quite tedious.

The Infinite Forest is interesting in concept: a semi-random sequence of areas that appear floating in the void, offering different enemies and layouts every time you enter, which ought to ensure a fresh experience. The area is only accessible when you're on a mission, though, and it feels like it exists just to artificially lengthen each mission and adventure, as without the extended Infinite Forest section at the start of every one they'd feel quite short. If this area were part of the Mercury open world and hosted its own public events and adventures it would go a long way to making Curse Of Osiris feel more substantial. Sadly it isn't, and the expansion feels quite small and boxy.

> "NOTHING IN THIS EXPANSION CHANGES HOW THE GAME PLAYS IN ANY SIGNIFICANT WAY"

Acute loot pursuit

The two-to-three hour story has many of the same pros and cons as other Destiny narratives: it's backed up with solid and interesting lore, and the visuals are spectacular, but the dialogue is terrible and characters shallow. This is par for the course for Destiny at this stage, but the lack of improvement on the base game is unfortunate. The story missions themselves are fun but uninspiring. It's as enjoyable as it ever was to gun down hordes of hapless aliens, but the formula of 'gorgeous skybox with a linear corridor



VINTAGE VEX

Time travel shenanigans...

Those vexing Vex have built themselves a super simulation machine, and they're using it to plumb the depths of history and predict the future. A future where they are victorious, natch. It's actually a cool idea – an AI which uses simulated data about the past to outmanoeuvre their enemies. In this simulation, you'll meet some lovely earlier Vex models, like the gilded Precursor Goblins. Sadly Vex battle tactics have apparently not changed at all over the millennia, so they fight in exactly the same way as modern Vex. From this we can assume that the Vex evolved from ancient Apple technology.





Shooting aliens in the face because we are good and they are bad is fun. All hail the Light!





The story missions feature some beefy Vex, including Panoptes here, who likes to be called "Infinite Mind".



THE MURKY DEPTHS OF LEVIATHAN

Captain, steerage is full of murderous robots

After clearing the opulent upper decks of the Leviathan starship, full of big shirtless turtle-rhino boys, the lower levels of the Leviathan are an interesting change, from gold gilded baths to a murky poisonous cyber-swamp. Why is there a giant area full of gross water in this starship? Can you have bilges in the zero gravity of space? Well, the dirty water from the baths has to go somewhere… ew. We're just going to not think about all the times we fell in the water during that first platforming section.

The steerage section of the Leviathan has some serious health and safety violations going on as well – apparently the only way to reach the lowest levels of the starship is to jump into a giant hole with a murderous fan at the bottom, not to mention the huge fiery void you come to shortly afterwards. Let's not even start on the huge Vex death robot that lives in the horrific fiery void… Wait, how did all this fit inside the Leviathan? Space magic, probably.

Seriously though, Leviathan, Eater Of Worlds has some well-designed encounters. A tense platforming puzzle, a good old-fashioned gauntlet of mobs, a frantic and fast-paced timed challenge and a decidedly epic boss fight. We recommend not looking up a walkthrough for this one, because it's great fun trying to work out the encounters on your own (plus it adds some much-needed length to the experience!)

full of enemies' wears out its welcome pretty quickly.

There are a couple of fun boss encounters, but for the most part you should be prepared to kill a lot of random mooks in a lot of beautiful skyboxes. Curse Of Osiris adds no new enemies, so not only will you be gunning down mooks, but you'll be gunning down the same mooks that you were in the base game (albeit with a few reskins here and there mostly recycled from previous Destiny expansions). The whole thing feels like it was rushed out of the door to meet a tight deadline, what with all the reused assets (from both Destiny 2 and the original Destiny), balance issues, and scarce new content.

The new 'Raid lair', (which seems to be Bungie's fancy name for a small Raid tangentially linked to a bigger one) is an offshoot of the Leviathan from the base game. It's a short, three-encounter affair in which the Guardians explore the seedy underbelly of the colossal ship to take down a new threat. The encounters are well designed, particularly the final sections, but once again the whole thing feels far too short. A group of averagely skilled players shouldn't take more than an evening or two to clear it completely, less if you're using a guide and not just working it out as you go. The two new strikes are scaled-up versions of story missions but with new dialogue. By itself this would be forgivable, but when you consider everything else that's repetitive and recycled in the expansion, it's difficult to let it pass.

Pyramid scheme

There's new gear to be earned, though it should be noted that some of it is returning loot from the original Destiny. The new stuff looks pretty slick, however, including some lovely gilded Egyptian-style kit. For completionists, grabbing all the new Exotics will be a nice divergence. At the time of writing the new additions haven't shaken up the PvP scene, so don't expect any change from facing dozens of opponents using Better Devils and Uriel's Gift – for now, at least. Speaking of PvP, there are two new Crucible arenas. They're as pretty and well-laid-out as you would expect from Bungie, but it would have been nice to have a new Crucible game mode.

Disappointingly, there is nothing in this expansion that changes how the game plays in any significant way. No new race, no new enemies from existing races, no new weapon types, no new types of group activity. The only new endgame addition of any great interest is the Raid lair, and if you're a solo player or you struggle to get your clan organised to tackle Raids regularly (which given Destiny 2's poor social toolset would be understandable), there's nothing much for you beyond the short story campaign.

Nothing in Curse Of Osiris is outright terrible by itself. The problem arises when you remember that this is supposed to be a full expansion, and that it costs just under £17. That may not seem like much to some people, but when you consider how many excellent full games you can buy for that amount (or much less), paying that much for what would probably be a free update in most other MMOs is a difficult pill to swallow. There's not enough content, and the content that's there is recycled, repetitive, and limited. It's still Destiny 2, so if you're hooked on the base game and you want more, then this will serve you well enough. The shooting is still fun, the graphics and music are still great – however if you are looking for reasons to jump back into the game, or you were hoping for good value for money, you should skip this one. ■

The Osiris? The most powerful Guardian ever? The hero of Six Fronts? The Zavala before Zavala? Yeah, that guy.

GM LOVES...

- The gameplay and presentation are as good as ever.
- The new Raid lair is fun, and has some great encounters.

GM HATES...

- Short, small, and repetitive. It doesn't feel like a paid expansion.
- It does little to solve Destiny 2's existing problems.

Better than...



World Of Warcraft: Warlords Of Draenor
We suppose short, cheap, and disappointing is better than long, expensive, and bad.

Worse than...



Destiny: Rise Of Iron
Curse Of Osiris seems even more disappointing when compared to Bungie's previous expansions. Rise Of Iron, in particular, leaves it in the dust.

NEED TO KNOW



The exiled Guardian Osiris has a history in the series. In the first Destiny expansion, The Dark Below, a Crucible tournament, the Trials Of Osiris, was named in his honour. Here, we meet him in the flesh.

GM JUDGEMENT

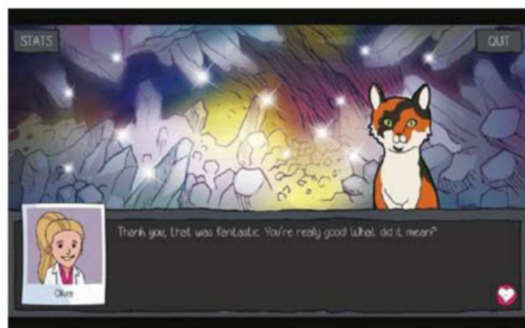
62%



This would be great if it were a free update to the game, but as a paid expansion it's severely lacking.
Laurence Phillips




Yes, there's a cat who is Sherlock Holmes. Should have called him Purrlock, though.





Format PC **Publisher** Bossa Studios **Developer** Bae Team **ETA** Out now **Players** 1

PURRFECT DATE

We've got a good feline about this

Visual novels have been undergoing a bit of a renaissance for several years now, and nothing's been more popular than the subset of dating games they've produced. Dream Daddy recently stole the hearts of many, but before that was the peculiar Hatoful Boyfriend, in which you have to date various pigeons (no, you're not a bird). In a similar vein comes Purrfect Date, a dating game in which your prospective partners are all cats, and there's a pun in every other sentence.

The game has you taking on the role of a new assistant, sent to Cat Island (not everything gets to be a pun) to help study the felines who are the island's sole inhabitants. Of course, nothing is that simple, and you soon find yourself a victim of the – imaginatively titled – cat virus, which is slowly turning you into a cat. You've limited time to research a cure, assuming you even want to since you're likely here to date one of the six felines on offer. No matter what you do, when your time is up that assistant's story comes to an end and you'll then play as their replacement human. This cycle continues for six playthroughs, and the challenge is to see how far you can push forward certain storylines over the course of each chapter, which does help keep the game engaging beyond the dating side of things.

Pawsitive atmosphere

It would've been all too easy for the developers to embrace the absurdity and go for a stream of cheap, lewd double-entendres, but Purrfect Date instead wants to be much more wholesome. The vibrant artwork and pleasant soundtrack make for an inviting space, one where there's plenty of humour but little of it crude or mean-spirited. The writing really is quite good, bringing sincerity to a very silly premise, managing to make each character, especially the cats, rounded and believable in their own right. Each mog is distinct and more fleshed-out than a mere archetype.

The dating, in truth, ends up being a proportionally small part of the overall game. There are darker moments in the game's main conspiracy plot – strange things are afoot on the magical Cat Island, including animal abuse, among other things, but the general vibe is feel good.

This chilled-out attitude does bump up against the game's structure. With a limited amount of time and assistants in which to solve mysteries and form relationships, it can sometimes be frustrating to find that an early mistake ripples throughout the rest of the game. It's very easy to find yourself in that last chapter unable to finish a storyline because of a poor choice you made earlier. Fixing such a mistake means restarting Purrfect Date from the very beginning, and while the game isn't terribly long (anywhere from 10 to 30 hours), it can still be really irritating to go through the same parts just to change one little thing.

Yet there's a lot to like for fans of visual novels. It's nicely upbeat, and is eager to make you feel at ease with friendly characters and a big helping of puns. If you don't mind having to replay a few times to see everything the game has to offer, then this might just be the laid-back visual novel for you. ■

"THERE ARE DARKER MOMENTS… STRANGE THINGS ARE AFOOT ON THE MAGICAL CAT ISLAND"

What did the cat say when she found out she was pregnant? You've got to be kitten me!

GM LOVES…

- ✓ The pleasant, friendly tone makes for a lovely escape.
- ✓ Characters, especially the cats, are engaging and funny.

GM HATES…

- ✗ The structure can punish early mistakes all too easily.
- ✗ Dating is a smaller part than suggested by the title.

Better than…



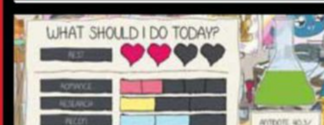
Hatoful Boyfriend
While it's not as delightfully strange as Hatoful Boyfriend, Purrfect Date makes for a much more enjoyable experience overall.

Worse than…



Dream Daddy
Despite a similar wholesomeness these cats just don't match up to those delicious daddies, which made for much more involved dating.

NEED TO KNOW



You only get six assistants to play as, so use your time as each one wisely. Wasted time or poor choices will cost you later, so do take care.

GM JUDGEMENT

72%



Fun, but often undone by its own structure, which can make the laid-back experience feel pressured.
Sam Greer



Format PC **Publisher** THQ Nordic **Developer** Grimlore Games **ETA** Out now **Players** 1-6

SPELLFORCE 3

A compelling RPG and RTS mash-up

This curious combo whisks you back in time with a modern fantasy tale that's chock-full of intrigue. Set over 500 years before the events of the first game, the absorbing plot explores the persecution of mages and the rise in power of anti-magic cult The Purity Of Light. For fans of the series, it's intriguing to see the world of Eo before the cataclysmic event known as the Convocation, and for those who haven't experienced the series before, it's a nice starting point to delve into this lore-rich, high fantasy world.

The prequel housed within this prequel acts as a tutorial to familiarise you with the various systems. While it might look somewhat daunting, it eases you into what is an extremely intuitive control scheme, and you'll get to grips with complicated mechanics in no time.

From here you'll be able to create your own character. As a child of the traitorous mage Isamo Tahar you're locked into playing as a human, but you've got freedom in terms of appearance, stats, and combat specialisations – so you can opt to be a close-combat warrior, archer, or magic wielder.

And you can't scoff at SpellForce 3's ambition. It effectively takes two popular gaming genres, RTS and RPG, and blends them in an inspired way that plays to the strengths of both. In part, it's an isometric RPG in which you explore the expansive outdoors and winding dungeons of this detailed world, hunting for treasure and tackling small-scale encounters with your band of heroes.

Magic moments

In classic RPG style, up to three companions can accompany you on your journey, each with their own individual skills trees for learning new abilities, and buffing stats. Experience is shared equally, resulting in a balanced party where no one hero ever feels over- or under-powered. There's considerable depth to each role and how you want to progress your party. Warriors are able to carry a single weapon and shield or dual-wield, and mages have the choice of white, black, or elemental magic, with a range of abilities specific to each class of combatant.

At times you'll find yourself playing full-on RTS scenarios that require careful base management and building up of your armies and supplies. Establishing outposts to expand territory and building structures to reap the land's resources is key to gaining ground in the game's bigger battles. There's only a finite amount of resources, such as trees and stone, in each area, and figuring out how best to use these and how to structure your defences is the difference between victory and defeat. As well as constructing facilities to gather items such as food and building materials, a barracks can train individual warriors of various disciplines, such as recruits and arsonists, to fight at your command. You can unlock additional structures and soldiers through blueprints.

The RTS aspect presents a meaty challenge, and the RPG mechanics certainly satisfy too. While SpellForce 3 doesn't provide all the depth and intricacy of more streamlined, single-genre experiences like Baldur's Gate and Age Of Empires, it's a must if you like to dabble in both genres. ■

> **"TAKES TWO POPULAR GAMING GENRES, RTS AND RPG, AND BLENDS THEM IN AN INSPIRED WAY"**

What weird combination does Anne-Marie like to put together? Peanut butter and dolly mixtures. It works, honest!

GM LOVES...

- A stunning world with a genuinely intriguing narrative.
- Accessible thanks to detailed tutorials and drip-fed mechanics.

GM HATES...

- May not fully satisfy more hardcore RTS and RPG fans.
- Getting your heroes to interact with objects is fiddly.

Better than...



ELEX
Despite its ambition and edgy universe, fellow THQ Nordic-published RPG ELEX was marred by a disjointed story and irksome combat mechanics.

Worse than...



Divinity: Original Sin II
Featuring a superb tactical battle system and tons of charisma, this PC-only game is quite simply one of the best RPGs ever made.

ONLINE



SpellForce 3 supports co-op for up to three players online or via LAN. You can specify what roles you want your comrades to perform, be that base-building or combat, which will prevent confusion.

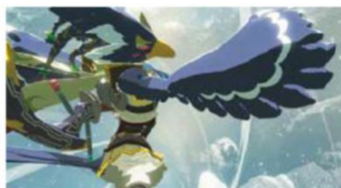
GM JUDGEMENT

83%

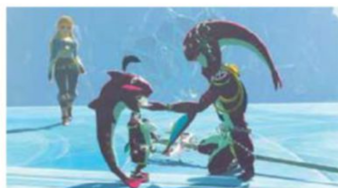


A successful splicing of two beloved genres that thoughtfully expands on the lore of the series.
Anne-Marie Coyle

It's disappointing that the battles against Ganon's various forms are simply revisited, but being forced to fight them with limited kit freshens things up a touch.









Format Switch (reviewed), Wii U **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Nintendo **ETA** Out now **Players** 1

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD – THE CHAMPIONS' BALLAD

The fat lady sings for 2017's best game – and she carries a decent tune



Forget any notion of this being the 'story DLC'. The Champions' Ballad is, in fact, a set of trials tied together by a wisp of narrative thread. That and the absence of new regions to explore might come as a disappointment, but by the time this add-on is over, you'll have a Goron-sized grin plastered across your face all the same.

As far as the story goes, don't expect to learn much beyond what you already knew. Instead, we get a bit of extra background colour about the Champions themselves, detailed in flashbacks to when Zelda met each of them. There are some delightful moments, notably, a showcase of absolute badassery from Urbosa (easily our pick of the four Champions), and a tender scene involving Mipha and a young Sidon. Daruk, meanwhile, displays an unlikely but endearing vulnerability, and while Revali's still annoyingly smug, we do get a glimpse of another side to him.

Though they're fairly short, these are among the best-directed cutscenes in the game, and amplify the sadness of the story. It's another reminder of the Ghibli influence: behind the sweetness and humour, there's a lingering undercurrent of melancholy, and the bittersweet grace note at its conclusion earns the tears it'll draw from those most invested in the tale. It's a ballad for a reason, you know.

One-hit thrill

As for Link, this means a return to where it all began, as you're summoned to the Shrine Of Resurrection to pick up a brand new weapon and start the kind of test that would make Hidetaka Miyazaki nod appreciatively. The One-Hit Obliterator (and what a brilliantly no-nonsense name that is) is deadly in more than one respect: it's true to its name, but holding it reduces Link's health to a quarter of a heart. In other words, every enemy is a potential one-hit obliterator, too. Oh, and you can't put it down until you've finished the first part of the trial, which asks you to clear out four groups of enemies and complete the shrines that emerge once you've slain the last of them.

The upshot is that the biggest enemies pose less of a challenge than before; the leaping Lizalfos are a pain, yes, but since you're quicker and nimbler than the hulking Moblins you're likely to down them before the message to take a swing

at you has travelled from pea-brain to limb. By contrast, their smaller cohorts become more fearsome threats: it's a chastening moment when you find yourself frantically sprinting from a pair of electric Keese, only to inadvertently collide with the edge of a spiked barrier.

Beast mode

It's tense stuff, and some will hate the lack of a safety net as they fall to the very last enemy in a group. Yet it serves a dual purpose. For one, it's a timely reminder of how dangerous the plateau felt at the very start of the game. And for those who've accrued the hearts, weapons, and armour to all but transform themselves into an unstoppable force by the endgame, it represents a trial worthy of the name. Since you need to have tamed all four Divine Beasts to play The Champions' Ballad, it's obviously designed for players who know what they're doing. We've all grown complacent by this stage, and so it's fitting that we're made to feel vulnerable once more.

And that's just the appetiser. The Obliterator is put away for good (pity; it would have been a nice option for proficient combatants) and four new waypoints appear on the map. Here you'll meet avian beefcake Kass, who's working on an accordion tribute to the four champions. Nearby, you'll find structures that reveal the approximate locations of three challenges for each, while Kass's words give you a clue about your objective. The rest you have to figure out for yourself.

There are no new regions to explore – though much of what you'll find here is tucked away in places there's a good chance you haven't yet visited – but this part of the adventure captures one of the most satisfying things about Breath Of The Wild. It isn't simply about dumbly following a map marker, but using the information you have to pinpoint where you've got to go (and, in a couple of cases, what to do when you get there) which makes the sense of accomplishment all the greater. For one, you'll have to wait for the dawn to show you the way; another depends on the nightly arrival of a majestic creature. Ringed gates provide courses for shield surfers, and sand-seal riders, while a third offers a Pilotwings-esque gliding challenge. Each of these unlocks another shrine, making up a dozen in all, in addition to the ones on the Great Plateau.

In fact, the shrines here are among the best in the whole game, the hallmark of a team that has naturally grown confident at building these elaborate puzzle challenges. Many require careful timing as well as thought, while one thrilling standout is a true test of your nerve: a gauntlet of spikes where just one hit is fatal, with a final, devious flourish putting you on a long, narrow platform with hazards thudding in from either side as the back wall slowly, menacingly, grinds toward you.

Awaiting you at the end of all this is another dungeon, styled like the Divine Beasts. Compact and intricate, it's essentially a piece of machinery operated from within, with Link cast as a tiny cog placed into various slots to make it function in different ways. Then follows a climactic encounter which, unlike the disappointingly recycled battles that round off each Champion's story, is completely new – and it's a match for the fight against Calamity Ganon at the very least.

At first, the ludicrous reward it yields (see Bike Drop) feels like it's come too late. Most will have seen just about every corner of Hyrule before even starting this DLC, after all. Yet it also sums up the best reason to play The Champions' Ballad: it's basically an excuse to spend another eight hours or so immersed in one of the most rich and bountiful game worlds ever made. And that's an invitation only a fool would pass up. ■

"FOR THOSE WHO'VE TRANSFORMED INTO AN UNSTOPPABLE FORCE, IT'S A TRIAL WORTHY OF THE NAME"

HYRULE HIGHLIGHTS

The best bits of the Ballad

The Champions' Ballad is like a concentrated hit of Zelda – almost as if Nintendo had challenged itself to condense Breath Of The Wild into a much shorter adventure. During the eight hours or so you'll spend back in Hyrule there are plenty of standout sequences, including these five.



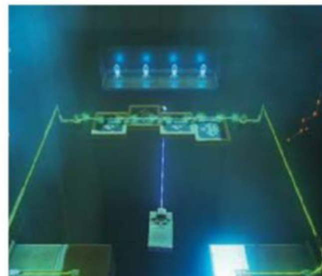
1 Demolishing enemies with a single swipe of the One-Hit Obliterator makes us wish we could keep it.



2 Being just a single hit from death means that even shrines feel properly dangerous.



3 The gate trials are so well done you'll wish for more. Lizalfos add a hint of danger to the sand-seal race.



4 Several shrines have optional puzzles. Completing this electrical circuit is tough but worthwhile.



5 Though slightly shorter than the other Divine Beasts, the final dungeon is a cracker.



BIKE DROP

You're in love with a cycle

For the most part, BOTW's horses feel like a vestigial limb, but the Master Cycle Zero – which is unlocked upon finishing the final trial – renders them all but useless. Not only does it cover the ground more quickly, you can ride it over awkward terrain – and it's got a sharp horn at the front that's perfect for impaling Bokoblins. And since it qualifies as a Sheikah Slate ability, you can summon it whenever you like.

Thought for the day: If logic doesn't help Link solve a problem, he can always Triforce.

GM LOVES...

- The new shrines maintain a consistently high standard.
- Link on a motorbike. Need we say any more?

GM HATES...

- Actually, the motorbike does look slightly out of place.
- The story elements are touching but rather slender.

Better than...



The Legend Of Zelda: Breath Of The Wild – The Master Trials

A solid challenge for determined adventurers, but limited in scope.

Worse than...



The Last Of Us: Left Behind

A completely different game, we know, but this is the gold standard as far as story-led DLC is concerned.

NEED TO KNOW



As well as the new trials, the DLC also offers a series of side-quests, with clues guiding you to chests that hold bonus gear based on characters from previous Legend Of Zelda games.

GM JUDGEMENT

84%



Not quite what was advertised, but a splendid coda to one of the greatest games ever made.

Chris Schilling

GM Review
The Final Verdict!

NOW PLAYING
This month's biggest time sinks on Team GM



1 HEARTHSTONE
PC
The new Dungeon Run mode – essentially turning the core card game into a roguelike RPG – is so brilliant that I've barely touched the competitive side of the new expansion.
Robin Valentine, Editor



2 THE EVIL WITHIN 2
PC
I'm loving this sequel's more open areas – exploring is wonderfully tense. And boy does it have a good shotgun, which is really the number one thing I look for in a horror game.
Robin Valentine, Editor



3 SUPER METROID
MINI SNES
There's never a bad time to return to the classics, and the Metroid series has a special place in my heart. The Phantoon fight is still an utter pain to get through, though.
Sam Greer, Staff Writer



4 OKAMI HD
PS4
I never played it when it originally released, but the years have not dulled Okami's charms – it still looks absolutely stunning in motion.
Rob Crossland, Art Editor



OFFICE LUNCHTIME GAME OF THE MONTH:
GANG BEASTS
PS4
You haven't known fear until you've seen Sam barrelling towards you, arms flailing, ready to headbutt you into unconsciousness. Also she's quite good at Gang Beasts.



As you complete objectives, scenarios are added for subsequent runs. There is an ending to work towards, but the path to getting there can be cryptic.

Format PC, Mobile (reviewed) **Publisher** Devolver Digital **Developer** Nerial **ETA** Out now **Players** 1

REIGNS: HER MAJESTY
Not quite fit for a queen

This regal sequel is about as distilled as a game can be. Taking inspiration from the likes of Mass Effect and The Walking Dead, its focus is choices and their consequences, but it jettisons almost everything else. Moment-to-moment, you're simply presented with a brief scenario, and must make a binary decision, before being presented with another, and so on.

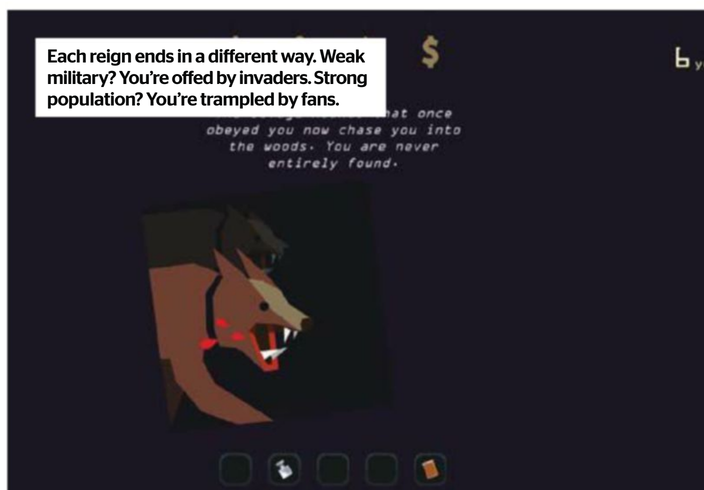
You take the role of a succession of medieval queens, each trying to survive as long as possible by keeping the kingdom's four factions – the church, the people, the military, and the merchants – in balance. A bishop might, for example, demand that you ban alcohol for your subjects. Agree, and the power of the church will rise, but your popularity with the people will plummet; decline, and the reverse will happen. Allow any faction to get too weak or too powerful and it's game over.

Peachy queen
This rapid-fire decision-making is immediately compelling, especially if you're playing on your phone, where you select your answers with satisfying left or right swipes of the thumb. But that stripped-down format can also make your adventures feel shallow and directionless. We soon found ourselves making most of our choices not based on our own moral compass, or on the long-term consequences of our decisions, but on what would balance the four meters most efficiently. The bishop wants to execute my dad? Hey, no problem there, as long as I get some church points.

Clever writing does prevent proceedings from ever getting too dry – penned by former games journalist Leigh Alexander, the story is by turns witty, intriguing, and surprisingly satirical as it plays out over the course of successive generations of rulers. Unfortunately, though, the format of the game leads to the same scenarios repeating many times each, inevitably running each twist or gag into the ground. Uncovering a murder plot is fun the first time – by the tenth it's tedious.

Like its predecessor, Reigns: Her Majesty is entertaining but slight. With each run only a few minutes long, it's the perfect mobile game to whip out when you've got a quiet moment, but too shallow to hold your full attention for long.
■ *Robin Valentine*

68%



Each reign ends in a different way. Weak military? You're offed by invaders. Strong population? You're trampled by fans.



An inventory screen is never really required, since key items are automatically used whenever you hit any kind of barrier.

Format PC **Publisher** Mind's Eclipse Interactive **Developer** Mind's Eclipse Interactive **ETA** 25 January **Players** 1

THE MIND'S ECLIPSE

A monochromatic short story that's not all black and white

Low on budget but high on ideas, The Mind's Eclipse is a sci-fi visual novella that sadly betrays the inexperience of its makers once too often. Set more than 300 years in the future, it casts you as an amnesiac scientist who groggily wakes up inside a seemingly deserted research station, keen to find his wife and daughter with the help of an enigmatic AI companion. Gradually, the mystery of what happened to them and the facility itself is teased out through dozens of messages, accessed via datapads, terminals, and by interfacing with the internal operating systems of the many corpses scattered about the place.



There are couple of sub-plots: thorough players will uncover evidence of VR addiction.

Yes, it's another ruined utopia. But there are moments of intrigue as a picture steadily begins to emerge from the various fragments, with the nature of a widely-anticipated event called The Eclipse proving one of the more compelling mysteries. The narrative explores a number of weighty themes, albeit ones common to the genre: transhumanism, surveillance, mortality, and scientists playing God. (Why do they always do that? It never ends well.) The game poses some uneasy questions about the role of the protagonist and his young companion in all this, while the ambiguous morality of other key players in the drama gives your brain something to chew on as you sweep your mouse over each static scene to see what you can interact with.

Negative space

A pity, then, that the story's sketchy on the details – in more ways than one. It's unclear why there's no pattern to the messages you're accessing, but the eventual excuse is little more than a clumsy hand-wave – and it's not the only lapse in logic. The hand-drawn monochrome art, meanwhile, is alarmingly uneven, often resembling rough early concepts rather than the finished article: it's hard to be disturbed by the sight of a dead body when it looks like a slapdash scribble rather than an actual corpse. An eerie, ethereal score adds a darkly portentous atmosphere, though it's a little too prominent and can be distracting at times, and an abrupt ending to the whole story undoes much of the music's good work. The result is a game that seems to have plenty to say, but struggles to express itself clearly.

■ *Chris Schilling*

50%

HOT DOWNLOADS

The latest DLC and expansions explored



As we enjoy living in the futuristic new year of 2018, developers seem more interested in delving into the past for this latest crop of delectable downloads.

First off, there's a new adventure for **Assassin's Creed: Origins. The Hidden Ones** picks up several years after the end of the main game, and follows the early days of the first brotherhood as Bayek and his mates travel to the Sinai peninsula to bash some Roman heads. It's the first of two planned single-player expansions – in March you'll be able to play the more supernaturally-themed Curse Of The Pharaohs, which sees Bayek tangling with mythological monsters and undead mummies.



Which brings us neatly to **Total Warhammer II's** latest downloadable army – the **Tomb Kings.** These skeleton warriors have a distinctly Egyptian feel, rising from great pyramids to march against the living. Accompanying them are all manner of bizarre bony constructs and living statues, from hulking Ushabti to burrowing Tomb Scorpions. Instead of messing about with all that magical vortex nonsense like everyone else, the Tomb Kings are out to gather the nine Cursed Books of Nagash and control the Black Pyramid, which is totally metal in that way only Warhammer can be.



Expect similar levels of rigorous historical accuracy in **Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus'** latest DLC, the brilliantly named **The Diaries Of Agent Silent Death.** As former secret agent and current Nazi-slaying assassin Jessica Valiant (voiced by Claudia Black), you'll infiltrate Hitler's bunkers in California and discover the secrets of Operation San Andreas. Jessica's party trick is her contortionism – she can squeeze herself through tight spaces with ease. Handy.



Leaning more on the side of real history is **Civilization VI: Rise And Fall.** This extensive expansion introduces new features and mechanics, including a system of loyalty and rebellion, the ability to appoint governors to rule cities, and the potential to lead your empire into a Golden Age. That's all alongside eight new civilisations and nine new leaders, allowing you to play as the Cree, the Mongolians, and, most radical of all, an Indian leader who isn't obsessed with nukes.



THIS MONTH IN...
SPIFFIN' SWORDS

As one of gaming's longest-running series, Final Fantasy has amassed a huge roster of iconic heroes and villains. This month you're able to pit them against each other in Dissidia Final Fantasy NT, a brawler originally exclusive to arcades and handhelds that's made its way to PS4. Players select a team of three characters and then engage an opposing team on battlefields from across the series' history.







MOTOSPEED INFLICTOR CK108

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- Full anti-ghosting 87 Keys: Support multi-touches working at the same time. Each key is controlled by a separate switch, to ensure that each key you press to record at the same time and in the game.
- Ergonomie keycaps: The keyboard is mould to the shape of your hand, ensures that your hands are always in the perfect position.
- Material: Made of high quality ABS and metal, with a matte-finish texture and caps of laser-etched buttons, the keyboard can support up to 60 million strokes.



M200 GAMING KEYBOARD

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This waterproof gaming keyboard mechanical is built for pro-grade performance, responsiveness and durability standing any condition like water.

It is also designed for precise and clean lighting through the keycap. It has 104 Keys and are always visible and never distracting, especially during late night gaming sessions. Function (FN) keys let you control volume, play and pause, skip track, mute, toggle lighting, enter game mode, etc.



ZELOTES 5500 DPI 7 BUTTON GAMING MOUSE

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This mouse is not only for gamer, but also perfect for daily use. The forward and back buttons on left side can go ahead to next page or go backward to last page when browsing. There are built-in colorful gradual change breathing light, soft color, cool and does not hurt eyes. There is no need to install driver or software, There is a button to automatically adjust, suitable for office and play games.

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If you've watched any professional level gaming recently you'll probably have noticed the wide selection of keyboards, mice and headphones. These are an essential part to any gaming set up and finding the right ones for you can be a challenging task. Make sure you do your due diligence on a range of different products and always remember is that if you've purchased something and it doesn't feel like it's the right fit, change it. Keep doing your research and find an alternative, it'll be worth it in the long run!

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With Mario but a babe, it's up to this gang of Yoshis to save the day.



SUPER MARIO WORLD 2: YOSHI'S ISLAND

The original jurassic lark

Dinosaurs are rarely both nice *and* cool. For instance, Barney The Dinosaur is a lovely fellow, but you're not going to enjoy ploughing through a boxset of his. On the other hand, the T. rex from Jurassic Park is an icon of cinema, but she'd devour you in the time it takes a glass of water to shake. Well praise be to Yoshi, who might be the only exception to that ultra-specific law.



The origin

Our green icon made his debut in Super Mario World, the iconic platformer that turned SNES into a must-own console. When discussing the creation of SMW with the official Nintendo website, director Takashi Tezuka claims that Miyamoto once said he wanted Mario to ride a horse. This led Tezuka to get artist Shigefumi Hino to start coming up with character designs for something which Mario could clamber on and ride. The pair experimented with a crocodile-esque design before landing on the Yoshi we know and love.

After his debut, Hino and Tezuka began brainstorming concepts for a game that made the handy dino-steed the protagonist instead. Hino said: "It's just my personal opinion, but I felt like with Super Mario World, we had done everything we could with a side-scrolling jumping game." Yoshi allowed them to address that feeling. They added in the Flutter Jump, where Yoshi could fly in the air for a brief moment and your goal was to carry something through the level, which would end up being Baby Mario.

During development, Donkey Kong Country released to considerable fanfare. According to Tezuka, some within Nintendo "wondered if we could do visuals like the ones in Donkey Kong Country", but the team decided to stick to their guns and go with a hand-drawn style.

The legend

They were right to do so. From the moment Baby Mario landed in the centre of a group of Yoshis, few games have had such a distinctive look on any console. Pastoral backdrops and a crayon-esque drawing style charmed in an instant, while the Super FX 2 chip helped produce some remarkable effects, such as stretching sprites which meant giant enemies transformed on screen, or if you touched a fungus in 1-7, the screen would ripple in a woozy way while the colours became more intense. In title, this is the sequel to Super Mario World, but it was wonderfully weird in its own unique way, which nobody expected.

But it's not just the aesthetic that makes this a classic. The idea is that you have to use Yoshi to carry Baby Mario to a kidnapped Baby Luigi, but the dino is full of so many tricks that he made his Italian pal look like an amateur. Our hero could grab enemies with his tongue and turn them into eggs, which he could then hurl, which was both grin-inducing and significantly changed how you would approach foes. He also had the ability to transform into vehicles, such as a helicopter, in certain sections, and he also had a smash jump that destroyed anything on the receiving end.

The inventiveness was coupled with outstanding level design. Levels overflowed with secrets, resulting in a genuine sense of discovery. Even the soundtrack was brilliant, brimming with hard-to-shake jingles. Like all of Nintendo's finest hours, this packed more ideas into a level than some of its contemporaries did into a whole game. Although Baby Mario's wail when you dropped him was 'last thing you hear before you die' harrowing.

Developer Nintendo
Publisher Nintendo
Released 1995
Format SNES
Get it On Mini SNES or Ebay

"PASTORAL BACKDROPS AND A CRAYON-ESQUE DRAWING STYLE CHARMED IN AN INSTANT"



Kamek's goons will whisk poor Baby Mazza off if you're not careful.







The menu music as you select levels is utterly delightful, and a real earworm.

The legacy

Unsurprisingly, this meant that Yoshi's Island flutter-jumped to both commercial and critical success. Our sister mag Edge bestowed 9/10 on it back in 1995, and according to VGchartz.com, it has shifted a very healthy 4.12 million globally. Considering N64 was only a year away when it launched, this was all the more impressive for a late-gen SNES game.

That success lead to sequels (oh hey, time for a Series Spotlight!), which have yet to really surpass what the original Yoshi's Island accomplished. But its freewheeling spirit could still be felt in the classic platformers of the current era. None more so than in Rayman Legends; its hand-drawn art style draws an obvious comparison, but that game also focuses on constantly delighting the player with new mechanics, from the first level to the very last.

With the arrival of Mini SNES, we got the chance to relive one of the best Mario games where he hardly plays a part. Considering there's a new Yoshi game lined up to hit Switch in 2018, the timing couldn't have been better. We'll be howling like Baby Mario if it doesn't deliver, though, so no pressure Ninty. ■

Series Spotlight

For an extinct creature, Yoshi sure gets around a lot...





1 Super Mario World

(SNES - 1992)

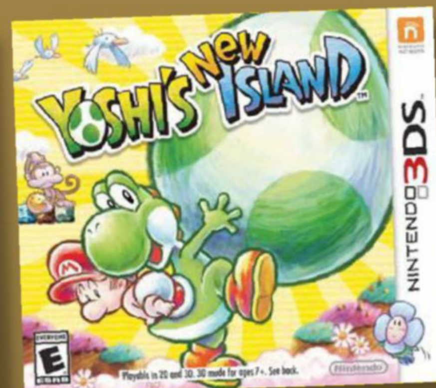
Yoshi's debut as Mario's ride also just happens to be one of the best 2D platformers of all time. While Yoshi hardly takes centre stage, he's an invaluable ally thanks to his ability to eat Koopas, Goombas, and other obstacles you face. All that despite Mario riding on his back and repeatedly punching him in the head.

2 Yoshi's Cookie

(SNES, NES - 1993)

Yoshi would have to wait a few years before his starring role in a platformer, so he kept himself busy in this puzzler. The aim was to match up different types of cookies on a grid to make them disappear from the screen. A two-player mode meant a friend could get in on the fun, but really, Yoshi deserved more.





3 Yoshi's Story

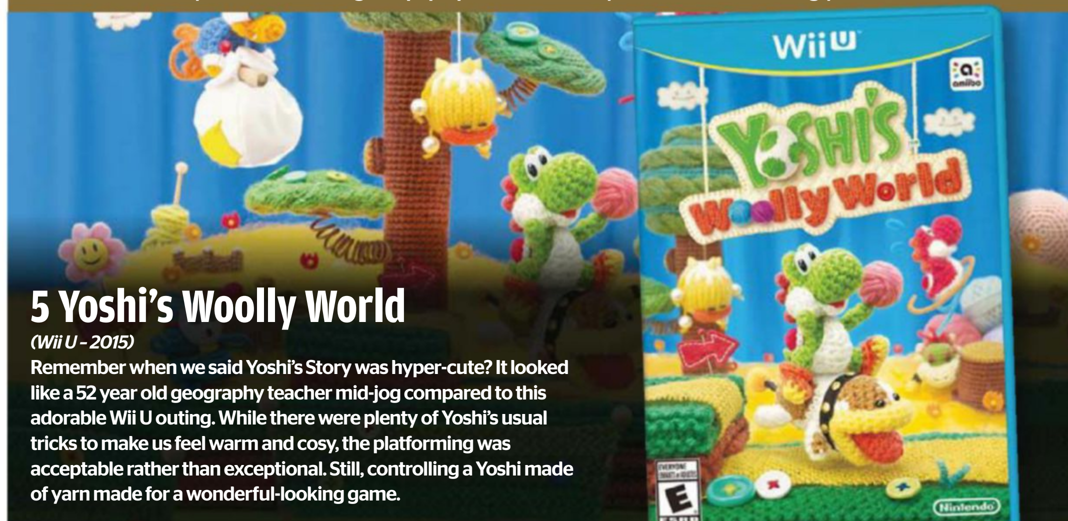
(N64 - 1998)

The sequel to Yoshi's Island, this still unbelievably pinch-the-cheeks cute series made the jump into 3D and brought in a new level structure. Now, you needed to collect 30 pieces of fruit to get through a level, but there was scope for secrets if you played it smart instead of fast. Plus, the story was told via an in-game pop-up book.

4 Yoshi's New Island

(3DS - 2014)

Picking up immediately after the original SNES game, this hews much closer to its older predecessor. Baby Mario was back on Yoshi's back, the friendly green dragon could transform into different vehicles again, and you flung eggs all over the shop once more. But perhaps because it stuck to the blueprint a little too closely, it didn't resonate strongly with fans.



5 Yoshi's Woolly World

(Wii U - 2015)

Remember when we said Yoshi's Story was hyper-cute? It looked like a 52 year old geography teacher mid-jog compared to this adorable Wii U outing. While there were plenty of Yoshi's usual tricks to make us feel warm and cosy, the platforming was acceptable rather than exceptional. Still, controlling a Yoshi made of yarn made for a wonderful-looking game.

SIX OF THE BEST...

BEST BUDDIES

Celebrating gaming's greatest enduring friendships

Call them pals, hombres, or comrades, we all have a special chum who we turn to. Whether it's a work colleague who helps get you through the 9-to-5 or a bestie you've been tight with since old times, there's no denying that life's just better when you have someone to share it with. That's why this month we're turning our attention to friends who stick it out, whatever the cost. Sometimes they've shared the move from 2D to 3D like a certain a moustached plumber and his brother. Other partnerships survive despite a constant barrage of fists and feet. And there are the ones who'll always appear in each others' games, no matter how questionable... Without further ado, let's check out the best buddies of gaming. ■

MARIO AND LUIGI

Mario Bros (NES, Arcade – 1983)

These original dons are what we should all aspire to be. Mario might lead, but Luigi always has his back, and they've bailed each other out of trouble on more than a few occasions. They even dress the same.

RYU AND KEN

Street Fighter II (PC, SNES, Amiga, Atari ST, C64, Spectrum, Arcade – 1991)

These two might always be trying to batter each other into human jelly, but that's because they have a deep respect for each other. They're pros, though – please don't try this at home with your best mate.





SAM AND MAX

Sam & Max Hit The Road (PC – 1993)

One's a justice-loving dog with a gun, the other is a hyperactive rabbit. They're unusual for hard- boiled detectives, but you won't find a finer double act. Their easy rapport even makes Ant and Dec jealous.

NATHAN DRAKE AND VICTOR SULLIVAN

Uncharted (PS3 - 2007)

One's a treasure-stealing Han Solo type, the other's got the finest 'tache since Tom Selleck was solving crimes in Hawaii. Together, the quips and shots just keep coming.

RATCHET AND CLANK

Ratchet & Clank (PS2 - 2002)

These two are close in every sense. Not only have they saved the galaxy on multiple occasions, but Clank can usually be found on his pal's furry back. We're sure he gets off when Ratchet wants a kip.

SONIC AND TAILS

Sonic The Hedgehog (Mega Drive - 1992)

Being the fastest creature alive would be a drag if no-one could keep up with you. Fortunately for Sega's best boy, Miles 'Tails' Prower is always close by, through thick and... well, mostly thin.

Grab Bag

Retro gems from every era

Awesome Boss!



Metal Gear Solid

Format PS1 **Developer** Kojima Productions **Released** 1997

Psycho Mantis is the original Metal Gear series wild card. A boss who can read your mind (cough, your controller inputs and memory card), which forced you to think in a way no other game did at the time. While plugging your controller into port two might be an easy thing to do, it's still an ingenious touch that makes Mantis a true original.

Classic Moment!



Hitman Blood Money

Format PC, GameCube, Xbox, PS2
Developer Io Interactive **Released** 2006

Hitman has always had a silly streak, but the mission 'The Murder Of Crows', set during Mardi Gras, walked the perfect line between daft and tense. On the one hand, you were tracking a team of killers who are (almost) as capable as 47. On the other, they were dressed as giant birds. Hitman meets Sesame Street?

Remake Request!



Rayman

Format PS1 **Developer** Ubisoft **Released** 1995

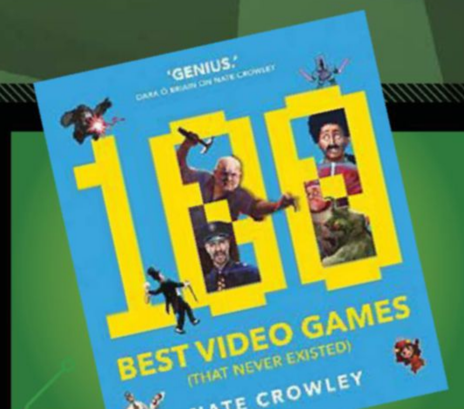
The limbless legend's first side-scrolling adventure is a forgotten gem and deserves the Ubi Art treatment that sequels Rayman Origins and Legends got. While it was as tough as any mid '90s platformer – Band Land caused much wailing at GM Manor – the surreal lands you had to rescue Electoons from were so captivating, we'd love a chance to revisit them properly.



Look, Are You Coming In Or Not? is a game about trying to look after a cat in a space station. Trickier than it sounds...

I THINK, THEREFORE I JAM

We get involved with Rebellion's 25th anniversary game jam, and find out just what the Sniper Elite 4 studio can create in only three days



Crowley's book came about after he tweeted he would create an imaginary game for every Like.

Where is it funnier to put the cat s*?" asks Rebellion lead designer Steve Bristow. "The duvet? Or the pillow?" We point to the pillow and an icon for randomly appearing faeces is put in place. It's already a strange day, and we've only just arrived at Rebellion, where the team is celebrating its 25th anniversary with a three-day game jam. Everyone in the office is taking part, and there are T-shirts everywhere emblazoned with the theme, Nate Crowley's book, 100 Best Video Games (That Never Existed).**

Encompassing such bizarre titles as Wetherspoons Fetish Party, Vin Diesel's Weasel Eagle, and the infamous arcade title known only as 'The Clown Game' where players must drip their blood into a container to play, the book is packed with brilliant yet ludicrous games. Rebellion was involved in bringing the illustrations to life, making the book a perfect theme for the game jam. *This* is where the cat poo comes in. One of more than 15 mini dev crews, Bristow and his team are responsible for Look, Are You Coming In Or Not? This features a man on a space station looking after a furry friend while trying desperately to maintain oxygen levels and stop rogue paws from pressing the self-destruct button. So, er, why choose cat faeces as entertainment?

"This immediately grabbed my attention," grins Bristow, opening the book to read the description aloud. "'Balancing the claustrophobic horror of space with the maddening futility of cat ownership.' I think if a game designer can't be inspired by that sentence then they need to go and look for another job because the first line I read of this book was that and I was already laughing. But also – and this is the genius of the book – there's part of you that thinks that it would actually work."

As game jams go, there's serious talent at work here. Rebellion is responsible for the Sniper Elite series, the Nazi Zombie Army franchise, VR game Batttlezone, and upcoming mummy co-op shooter Strange Brigade. If teams so desire, they can craft their games in Rebellion's engine, Asura. Before it even got to that, though, Bristow created a top-down prototype in GameMaker to see how things would play out. "You've got various mechanics," he explains. "You've got oxygen levels and a CO2 scrubber, and you've got an air quality bar, food bar, water bar, and an energy bar. You need to maintain your energy bar or your character starts staggering around."

Destruction derby

This is a busy plate spinner even before your feline friend arrives and starts um, dropping the air quality. "The version of the game in the book that Nate conceived is a deliberately pretentiously written meditation on loneliness," says Bristow. "I think if you say 'person on spaceship with cat' you kind of automatically have that. I love that idea." This is clear in the version the team has gone on to build in the Asura engine. The fans of the space station hum, and the full experience is in first-person with buttons to press and cat faeces to punt

"TRY TO STOP ROGUE PAWS FROM PRESSING THE SELF-DESTRUCT BUTTON"



Work Kitchen Anecdote Bastard: all the awkwardness of a tea break but with more murderous psychopathy.



The team only had three days to build their creations but had all the tools of Rebellion at their disposal.



Coding, design, audio, and even photogrammetry were all done in-house by Rebellion's developers. The book's author Nate Crowley was roped in for some audio voice work too.





out of the airlock into space. Suddenly we want to play a game that sounded like a joke 15 minutes ago.

Wandering across the office we join Rebellion head of creative, Tim Jones, and head of art, Chris Payton, to look at their project. "We're working on Work Kitchen Anecdote Bastard, where you're trying to get your coffee out of the kitchen and to escape the tedious bastard who is pouring loads of anecdotes at you," grins Jones. "It's a very British thing where you're not wanting to upset the person who's talking to you, even though you really want to get away from them. We kind of wanted to explore 'what does happen if you really upset this person' so we've taken that to an extreme..." Jones shows me two meters on the screen. One is the unpleasant colleague's emotional state and the other is your success at escaping the kitchen.

What happens when the talkative colleague snaps? "You *can* get away but if you wind him up too much, he'll go into full-on rage, disappear out of the kitchen and back to the office where you'll have to see how many of your colleagues still remain living," chuckles Jones. "In this office, banging your head on your desk is the mode of productivity. The fewer people left alive to bang their heads on the desk... the lower the productivity and the lower your score."

> SEE THIS! SEE THIS! SEE THIS! SEE THIS! SEE THIS! SEE THIS! SEE THIS! SEE THIS!
>
> **Read this!**
>
> **Catch up with the original ideas for the game jam in Nate Crowley's book 100 Best Video Games (That Never Existed). Buy it on Amazon here: bit.ly/gm100games**

Crowley's magic

There's something beautiful and worrying about the situation, but we manage to grin, escape, and grab a quick second with the man who started it all, Nate Crowley. How does it feel to have his creations made real? "It's really odd to have a whole warehouse full of people making your brain playable," he smiles. "It's like a fever dream but a nice one. There's a lot of people talking about how to make a cat on a space station more irritating, but it's an honour really." It turns out that it's an honour to witness too. ■



GLOBAL MASTER

The best art books for your coffee table



HAIR TODAY

While you could always go for the perfectly reasonable £32.50 edition of The Art And Design Of Final Fantasy XV from art dealers Cook & Becker, you know you want the ultra-limited edition Collector's Edition with chocobo-yellow slip case. Hey, it's *only* £132.50 and comes with two art prints...



NO CRASH DECISIONS

Why choose your favourite Naughty Dog creation when you can pore over the development of the Uncharted series, Crash Bandicoot, Jak & Daxter, *and* the Last Of Us? Packed with concept art and info from the dark days of the Sony studio's work on the first Crash game, this isn't an art book to miss.



LINKED IN

Time to settle down at a stable and read for the night. The Legends Of Zelda: Art And Artifacts includes a staggering 30 years' worth of concept art for the series as well as rare box art and interviews with the artists. Definitely one to add to your Zelda shrine.

GM

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MONSTER HUNTER: WORLD REVIEWED

AND MUCH MORE!

Due to the unpredictable nature of the gaming world, all contents are subject to change.

GamesMaster

GAME GUIDE

Our definitive list of the best games to play right now

Not sure which games to grab? Trust the experts (that's us) to shine a light of clarity through your fog of confusion. Over this spread you'll find GamesMaster's 100 per cent scientifically accurate and indisputable list of the greatest games on modern machines – updated monthly – as well as the top five most vital exclusives on each of the major platforms. Pick one of these up and, buddy, you're going to have yourself a good time.



1



THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD

Switch / Wii U

Nintendo casually revolutionises the open-world genre with perhaps the best launch title ever. Explore, fight, and cook your way across Hyrule.

2



GRAND THEFT AUTO V

PS4 / XO / PC / PS3 / 360

Rockstar's most detailed, immersive cityscape yet serves as the backdrop for a brilliantly explosive, multi-layered crime saga.

3

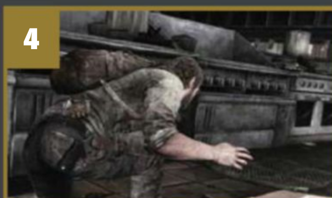


THE WITCHER 3: WILD HUNT

PS4 / XO / PC

An unbelievably vast fantasy world, where grim adventure – and brilliantly mature, engaging storytelling – lurks around every corner.

4



THE LAST OF US

PS4 / PS3

Naughty Dog's greatest triumph yet: the dark and truly cinematic tale of Joel and Ellie, two survivors in a dying world.

5



DARK SOULS III

PS4 / XO / PC

Take on some of gaming's most unforgiving enemies in weighty, impactful battles. There are few games more satisfying to beat.

6



PERSONA 5

PS4 / PS3

The greatest JRPG on current-gen – a stylish, rebellious story of teenage fury and surreal journeys into your enemies' minds.

7



HORIZON: ZERO DAWN

PS4

A truly unique vision from the creators of Killzone. Primitive humans hunt robotic beasts across a beautiful wilderness.


8

SUPER MARIO ODYSSEY
Switch / Wii U
Switch's first Mario game is also one of the best ever, taking you on an unashamedly joyous globe-trotting adventure.


9

UNCHARTED 4: A THIEF'S END
PS4
An incredible end to one of the most spectacular series around, seeing Nathan Drake off in style. One of the best-looking games ever made.


10

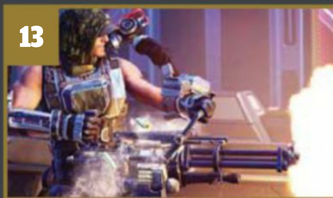
FORZA MOTORSPORT 7
XO / PC
The best entry in the series yet, and one of the greatest racing games ever made. It's absolutely gorgeous to boot.


11

OVERWATCH
PS4 / XO / PC
Colourful characters and slick shooting make this multiplayer FPS from the makers of World Of Warcraft utterly irresistible.


12

MARIO KART 8
Switch / Wii U
The definitive kart racer, now portable and packed with new features on Switch. Own a Nintendo console? This is a must-have.


13

XCOM 2
PS4 / XO / PC
A turn-based strategy masterpiece that doesn't pull its punches. Try not to get too attached to your soldiers, eh?


14

MIDDLE-EARTH: SHADOW OF WAR
PS4 / XO / PC
Solid third-person action elevated by its incredible system of procedurally-generated orcs, each with their own personality.


15

TOWERFALL ASCENSION
Switch / PS4 / XO / PC / PS Vita
A true legend of local multiplayer action that still eats up our office lunchtimes to this day. The very definition of easy to learn, hard to master.


16

HELLBLADE: SENUA'S SACRIFICE
PS4 / PC
A harrowing journey into a mythological underworld serves as the perfect backdrop to an exploration of real-world mental illness.


17

METAL GEAR SOLID V: THE PHANTOM PAIN
PS4 / XO / PC / PS3 / 360
Hideo Kojima's last hurrah brings open-world action to the revered series.


18

DOTA 2
PC
A strange and intimidating beast – but take the time to learn its secrets and you'll find a game of incredible tactical depth and variety.


19

HEARTHSTONE
PC / Mobile
Blizzard achieves the once-impossible – making deck-building CCGs accessible to all. Prepare to lose all your free time in 15-minute chunks.


20

MARIO + RABBIDS KINGDOMS BATTLE
Switch
Don't let its cute looks fool you – this is a tight and devilishly difficult turn-based strategy game.


21

BLOODBORNE
PS4
Dark Souls' more agile cousin, tighter and faster but no less punishing, in a world of gothic horror and Lovecraftian nightmares.


22

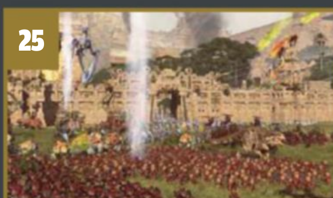
RESIDENT EVIL 7: BIOHAZARD
PS4 / XO / PC
First-person horror action that both pays fitting tribute to the series' past, and tries something totally different. Even more terrifying in VR.


23

PYRE
PS4 / PC
This spellbinding follow-up to Bastion seamlessly blends intricate storytelling with… well, magical basketball, basically. Trust us, it works.


24

TALES FROM THE BORDERLANDS
PS4 / XO / PC / PS3 / 360 / Mobile
Telltale's formula at its very best – witty, exciting, and packed with unforgettable characters. Don't be put off by the setting.


25

TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER II
PC
Strategy gaming on an incredible scale, in a gloriously over-the-top fantasy world. Get the first one too and you can combine them!

THE TOP EXCLUSIVES
The five best for each console



1. FORZA MOTORSPORT 7
2. HALO 5: GUARDIANS
3. KALIMBA
4. QUANTUM BREAK
5. GEARS OF WAR 4



1. THE LAST OF US REMASTERED
2. HORIZON: ZERO DAWN
3. UNCHARTED 4: A THIEF'S END
4. HELLBLADE
5. BLOODBORNE



1. THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD
2. SUPER MARIO ODYSSEY
3. MARIO KART 8 DELUXE
4. MARIO + RABBIDS KINGDOM BATTLE
5. ARMS



1. DOTA 2
2. TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER II
3. GUILD WARS 2
4. THE SIMS 4
5. CRUSADER KINGS 2



1. POKÉMON SUN AND MOON
2. FIRE EMBLEM FATES
3. ANIMAL CROSSING: NEW LEAF
4. MONSTER HUNTER GENERATIONS
5. THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: A LINK BETWEEN WORLDS



1. HEARTHSTONE
2. DEVICE 6
3. 80 DAYS
4. SORCERY 4
5. MONUMENT VALLEY

IT'S RESU-ME, MARIO!

Nintendo's mascot is a man of many talents – and many jobs. But which of these occupations has he partaken in, and which are just red herrings? Have a go at ticking the ones you think he's done – answers at the bottom of the page.

- PLUMBER
- FENCER
- BUTCHER
- ASTRONAUT
- PIZZA BOY
- FISHERMAN
- LIBRARIAN
- HOTEL MANAGER
- GARDENER
- RACING DRIVER
- SOLDIER
- CARPENTER
- ZOO KEEPER
- PILOT
- TAXIDERMIST
- JOCKEY
- ATHLETE
- CHEF
- LUMBERJACK
- POLICEMAN
- DOCTOR
- ARTIST
- STUNT BIKER
- THEME PARK OWNER
- FARMER
- SCIENTIST
- TOY MAKER
- DEMOLITION WORKER
- SCUBA DIVER
- BREWERY WORKER

Answers:
All of these are jobs Mario has really done: Plumber (Super Mario Bros), Fencer (Mario & Sonic At The Olympic Games), Fisherman (Mario Party), Racing Driver (Mario Kart), Soldier (Mario's Bombs Away), Carpenter (Donkey Kong), Pilot (Super Mario Land), Jockey (Mario & Sonic At The Olympic Games), Athlete (Mario & Sonic At The Olympic Games), Chef (Chef), Doctor (Dr. Mario), Artist (Mario Paint), Stunt Biker (Excite Bike: Bun Bun Mario Stadium), Toy Maker (Mario Vs. Donkey Kong), Demolition Worker (Wrecking Crew), Scuba Diver (Octopus), Brewery Worker (Mario Bros Game & Watch)